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TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL PHILOSOPHY

By

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B.A. Philosophy, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, 2020

Thesis

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## Traditional Ecological Philosophy

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Traditional Ecological Philosophy is a collection of essays that span a range of topics. The essays are personal, creative non-fiction, yet speak to larger philosophical themes, and are annotated with sources from multiple disciplines. As a student of science, I felt it necessary to include cited research, but made them into endnotes so as not to take the reader out of the essays with in-text citations. I tried to include as much peer-reviewed literature as well as books I find credible. But also, as a student of Indigenous wisdom, I also felt that traditional knowledge has legitimate credibility, which is also included. It is also due to Indigenous wisdom and personal outlook as to why I chose to capitalize all that is considered to be sacred and having personhood in the Ecosystem to the tribes for which I belong. I tried hard not to share anything my elders would find too sensitive to the culture. Granted, almost everything I write about regarding Indigenous knowledge is cited from other sources. Everything else I consulted with member of my tribe(s) for.

For too long I felt the essays felt too philosophical for creative writing and too creative for Philosophy. However, I realize there are many ways to disseminate ideas and information, and I was inspired to occupy a writing niche similar to other prominent Indigenous writers. *Tricksters Are for Kids* is a personal journey of reconciling scientific skepticism and being deeply imbedded in my Indigenous upbringing, which is inherently spiritual. *Traditional Ecological Philosophy* (the essay) is slightly more of an academic piece that is less anecdotal, and is about the applied science and philosophy of Indigenous wisdom. *Mind Under Matter* explores the mysteries of consciousness, and how consciousness may extend further than we tend to think. Addiction, recovery, and the struggle with guilt are the main themes of *Medicine: An Ode to Innocence*. *Uncle Ted's Cabin* examines the risks of Artificial Intelligence. I wanted this to be a personal piece, as I feel entirely too unqualified to speak on something like AI. *Mind Field* shares my experience with lucid dreaming, struggling to understand what dreams mean, to ultimately making a discovery through the phenomenon. And finally, *Death of Belonging* speaks to the growing societal problem of modern loneliness, and how Indigenous culture is, in-part, one solution to it.

At face value it may seem as if the essays are too disparate and not connecting at all. However, I would argue that what connects them is simply Nature itself. There seems to be a growing movement to expand what "Nature" means. To me Nature permeates everything, including the central themes of the essays.

# Table of Contents

Tricksters Are for Kids..... Pg. 1

Traditional Ecological Philosophy.....Pg. 15

Mind Under Matter..... Pg. 26

Medicine: An Ode to Innocence.....Pg. 41

Uncle Ted’s Cabin.....Pg. 57

Mind Field.....Pg. 70

Death of Belonging.....Pg. 83

Notes.....Pg. 94

## Tricksters Are for Kids

It was summer time. Napi awoke with the Sun to the east just as the Birds chirped their unique tones. Midday is when the Insects began to sing their songs even into the vespertine of the Land along the backbone of the World, also known as the Rocky Mountains. The Hills were green and the Skies blue. The days were lush and provided everything one could need. Napi, the trickster Human character of Blackfoot lore wandered about the Land, seeking what kind of mischief he could stir up that day. Napi stories teach us how to interact with Nature, but it's most easily learned from Napi's mistreatment of Nature. Not just of Animals, but Plants, and even Rocks. Napi meant well, but never hesitated to get his way against others by means of trickery. One day he came upon a colorful Aspen Forest. As he dubiously wandered deeper and deeper into the deciduous Forest, he began to hear voices. As he got closer and closer the voices got louder and louder; finally revealing the source of the voices, it was a group of Chickadees (*Poecile atricapillus*) or as we call them, *Niipo Mahkeeks*.

The Chickadees greeted him, as they knew who he was since he was the only Human at that time. It turns out they were playing a bizarre game, and were so excited they hadn't heard him approaching. They began to talk and eventually Napi asked about the game they were playing. One Chickadee said to him, "we'll teach you how to play, but you cannot do it more than four times". Almost nothing is done more than four times at once for the Blackfeet. It's a culturally built-in mandate of moderation. Napi agreed to their wishes and the Chickadee looked at a nearby Aspen and said, *Niipoo makit*, and their eyeballs left their head and went straight out and attached to a nearby Tree. Then

the Chickadee said, *Poohsa pii pomakit*, and then their eyeballs would return. Napi was amazed and couldn't wait his turn—he was given permission to try the ritual. He said the magic word, *Niipoo makit*. Just as he was taught, his eyes too left his head and landed on the nearby Tree. *Poohsa pii pomakit*, and they returned. Overjoyed and thankful for learning the game he did it three more times, but as promised, he ended his turn there, and they soon all went their separate ways.

Napi continued wandering about the Land as usual. Bored, lonely, and looking for entertainment he decided to try the new game again by himself. He found the nearest Aspen and spoke the words yet again, *Niipoo makit*, *Poohsa pii pomakit*. He had reached his limit and done it four times, but decided he enjoyed it so much, one more time couldn't hurt, he thought. He spoke again, *Niipoo makit* and his eyeballs left once more and attached to the Tree. *Poohsa pii pomakit* he said, but much to his surprise his eyes didn't return. A moment of shock overtook Napi as he realized he had broken the one rule of the game, moderation, and his eyes remained on the Tree. Panicked, Napi realized his eyes were gone forever. He then flailed, stumbled, and worried his way around looking for help.

Some time had passed and Napi sat and pondered his mistake, when seemingly out of nowhere he smelled an unbearable stench, almost as if it was right in front of his face. He jerked his head away but soon the smell followed. He had a hunch that something was playing tricks on him. Napi reached out quickly and grabbed two handfuls of fur. *Aha!* just as he thought, it was Coyote, another trickster. The smell was coming from Coyote's sore paw and was putting it in front of Napi's nose to antagonize him. The two of them would always try to trick the other to get the upper hand, normally Coyote would

always come out on top. Napi was so angry this time though, he plucked out Coyote's eyes and replaced them as his own to see once again. He then put Gooseberries (*Ribes hirtellum*) in the sockets of Coyote's face where their eyes once were. To this day that is why Aspen Trees have eyes all over them that seem to watch your every move, and if you shine a light in Coyote's eyes at night they gleam and glimmer in green from the Gooseberries. You may not be able to bullshit a bullshitter, but I guess if you're Napi, you can trick a trickster.

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I always heard that story and others like it as a child—but they were just that, children's stories. My scientific mind couldn't accept such stories as literally true around 2018. I had just entered into a new phase of life I hadn't experienced before. An existential crisis grounded in pure nihilism. Not depression, not apathy, and not a disregard for life. Nihilism. Nothing really mattered to me anymore. I started seeing arbitrary patterns in everything that seemed to hold no matter where I was at every scale. Every time I met someone new, the conversations were almost exactly the same as any previous interaction. Every social gathering was just a repackaged version of the one before, where all the dynamics and conversations were basically the same. Even individuals didn't seem too dissimilar from each other to me at that point. Every news cycle was just that, a cycle. Same old same old. Even if the World ended, I thought, the Universe would continue on as usual; this is referred to as cosmic indifference. The World will end eventually, why does it matter if Humans speed up the process with



anthropogenic climate change or not? I simply had too much time on my hands to let my mind run wild.

It wasn't always this way for me. I used to believe in something; I guess I believed in and had faith in Humanity. But then things began to compound and wear on my mind. I had come up three credits short of graduating from my undergraduate degree. I failed to understand the philosophy of science and received the scarlet letter of any academic transcript. An F for failure. On top of that I developed an anxiety disorder, a long-term relationship had just ended, and all my friends and family seemed to keep passing away at young ages from preventable causes, as is common on the reservation. Drinking and driving, drug overdoses, and even murder were some of the causes of death. Losing one after another and coping with constant loss made me lose hope in many things. There was a glimmer of assurance though, that as I buried each of them into the Earth, their bodies would break down and still be part of the Ecosystem and remain in the cycle of life. There's beauty in that for me.

Even though I failed philosophy of science, it was probably the most impactful of any class I had ever taken. I began to see things objectively and started to understand the scientific method better. This was in stark contrast to my former self who was known amongst family and friends as being "spiritual but not religious". I now knew the difference between science and pseudoscience, and now I understood why healthy amounts of skepticism are inherent for any kind of scientific endeavor. So, that's what I became, a skeptic. Much like the justice system in the U.S. is supposed to see people as innocent until proven guilty, well to me everything was bullshit until demonstrated otherwise by science. Even though this line of reasoning is the basis for all things

science and progress, it was very conflicting for a young Indigenous person like myself whose culture is inherently spiritual. There are so many stories about Napi talking with Animals, or magical places, and creation stories that some people very close to me believe to literally be true, but I just couldn't accept that part of my culture. Every time I would talk with my brother, Jesse it would always become a debate. "You've been living in the city too long", he would always conclude. It was as if Coyote really was a trickster and it put an overcast in my mind where light couldn't shine through. How could I identify as Indigenous, but deny the basis for my own Indigeneity?

I began to contemplate great religious issues like *The Problem of Evil*. Just as the philosophers have always said, if there is a god, they would have to be either impotent or evil. In other words, this god or gods would either be not all good, or not all powerful. If god wanted to end something as terrible as genocide but couldn't, it is not all powerful. If it could end genocide but chose not to, it is not all good—and lastly, if god is omniscient, this god knew people like Hitler would commit genocide, and created him anyway. But sometimes religious apologists will try to employ what's called *The Free Will Defense*. They say that god created Humans with free will, and knows that committing terrible things are a possibility, but god ultimately lets the Humans decide whether or not to do them. But we can use the same logic and assume that if god gave Humans free will knowing they'd commit terrible atrocities, then god isn't all good. If god couldn't have created people without free will knowing they'd do bad things, then god isn't all powerful. Also, if god gave Humans free will and didn't know they'd do terrible things, then god isn't all knowing.

But the concept of free will is a whole other can of worms, but I will lastly just say that it doesn't seem as if Humans have any free will at all. We now have scientific data from things like EEG and fMRI machines which have found that we can accurately predict what someone will chose to do sometimes up to ten seconds before it becomes a conscious thought for them.

<sup>1</sup> This means that it seems that we make choices consciously, but our brains have already run the calculations and subconsciously chose for us before it even became a conscious choice.

I realized the common denominator to these issues was belief. It's not difficult to get Humans to believe almost anything without sufficient evidence. Belief explains everything from cults, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and of course religious ideology in conjunction with logical fallacies and cognitive biases. In 1997 Marshall Applewhite, known then as Do convinced himself and 38 other devout followers to commit mass suicide.<sup>2</sup> This was the famous Heaven's Gate cult. One common misconception about cults is that they are filled with mentally ill and uneducated people, but these were every-day educated adults who's only issue was literally believing a UFO would bring their transcended bodies to heaven.<sup>3</sup> Of course, those are the extremes of belief, but it isn't too far off from how many World leaders believe in something like the rapture or the second coming of Jesus. And just because I began to examine these phenomena more closely in no way prevents me from being susceptible to biases and certain beliefs but could just see it clearer.

What would my great great grandmother think of my nihilism? She survived the Baker Massacre here in Montana in 1870. She was just a little girl when Colonel Baker

stormed her camp, confusing them for another band of us looking for Owl Child who killed a prominent rancher in Helena. When told it was the wrong group, Baker, who was plastered drunk replied “That makes no difference, one band or another of them; they are all Piegans (Blackfeet) and we will attack them”. They opened fire, and Chief Heavyrunner died with his government documents in his hand stating that they were a friendly band. He died along with 176 other Blackfeet on that fateful frigid day in January.<sup>4</sup> My great great grandmother, *Entsima*, only being a child herself, had to take care of her younger brother and walk miles in subzero temperature, along with all the other children to Fort Benton. When they got there, they refused to go into the fort thinking that the cavalry would still kill them. *Entsima* lived long enough to hold my father in her arms. From what I’ve gathered, she actually lived the rest of her life happy and was always laughing, making jokes, and certainly not nihilistic like I was. I’ve never met *Entsima*, but sometimes I miss her. There’s beauty in that for me.

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My attempt at rationality was being contradicted by my bleak outlook on Humanity at that time, but I knew I couldn’t be tricked by my own thoughts much longer. I wasn’t doing much with my life anyway and felt I might as well finish my degree and have something to my name. I was still living in Missoula, Montana at that time home of the University of Montana. Missoula is in west-central Montana on the opposite side of

the Rockies from where I grew up in Browning. After seemingly endless email threads and a mixture of emotions I decided to finish what I started—but wait. I only needed two more classes to not only finish my degree but to receive a certificate in environmental ethics? I can get stoned with two Birds at once. Cool, I'll do that, I thought. And what's this? If I take two classes a semester I won't have to pay on my loans just yet? Sign me up. I needed one other class to temporarily avoid paying on my student loans.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) of Indigenous Peoples? *Hmm, that sounds fun*, I thought. After all, I'm Indigenous and maybe I'll learn something on top of being cheap, I thought, and I always heard the letters around campus: T-E-K.

After the first few lectures and readings on traditional knowledge I was hooked. Both to TEK and environmental philosophy. "Environmental philosophy?" I'm always asked, "explain that". "It's just that, The combination of the study of philosophy with a deep knowledge about environmental science". And who better understood that than the groups who truly lived being one with Nature like my people? We read about ancient Indigenous epistemologies, trade networks, why Plants and Animals were special to certain tribes, and why physical places were deemed sacred. I had combined my studies, and realized that in environmental philosophy there ironically weren't many Indigenous voices in all of those readings. Not surprising really. But more importantly, I quickly began to reorient my future to realize that there is something to an Indigenous outlook of Nature that is worth sharing. I could still be a skeptical, scientific-minded student, but at the same time, recognize that my people were onto something big. Not only was I reading and writing about an Indigenous approach to environmental philosophy, I was living it. Traditional Ecological Knowledge is essentially place-based

knowledge that a particular group learns, shares, and codifies in the culture to pass down generations regarding Nature mostly without the written record. These classes and books to me imbued science with so much wisdom that was missing, and yet Traditional Ecological Knowledge was almost unknown or overlooked in the academic world.

Around this time a small Grass Fire had burned alongside Mount Sentinel in the late summer. Mount Sentinel is famous in Missoula, as it is emboldened with a large “M” for Montana on it in concrete. What remained after the Fire was a big, burned, patch of blackness and lifelessness on an otherwise lush Hillside—*but just wait, it gets better*, I thought. Sure enough the following spring, that same patch was clearly the greenest patch on the entire Hillside. I had always read about the benefits of Fire ecology, and knew why my ancestors prescribed Fire as a tool, but this was the first time I had experienced it myself. I was almost embarrassed that it took me this long to see what I’ve always been told and read. That’s where our name, Blackfeet, comes from, the soot made our moccasins black after a burn from walking in the rubble. We used Fire to benefit everything from the Soil, Plants, the Animals, and ourselves. That’s exactly why the Spanish banned prescribed burns in California when they colonized. They only saw the lifelessness, and didn’t see the Grass turn greener on the other side.<sup>5</sup> As it turns out, Fire suppression creates more catastrophic burns in the future as Fire is a natural part of Ecology.

Another time, Missoula got a little more flooding than normal. The Clark Fork River had risen higher than I had ever seen it. I could tell since I walked my Dog on the River trail every day. *I’m going to conduct an experiment*, I thought to myself. There are

some Rosehip bushes (*Rosa rugosa*) that are completely submerged from the flooding, and there are others higher up out of the Water. Rosehips are a staple for Blackfeet medicine, and I kept an eye on them when they ripened later that fall.

*I knew it*, I thought as I compared both bushes later on. The ones that were submerged during the flooding produced Berries double in size later that fall as opposed to the ones who weren't submerged. Just as in science I conducted an experiment, had a hypothesis, a test, and a control group. Suddenly it occurred to me that I had read and written so many scientific papers that they became just that, paper. Something that was once alive but is now dead, extremely important, but not alive. TEK to me was more than just applied science, it was affording me the opportunity to literally live science just as my ancestors did. They had to. How else can you survive in the wicked winter conditions of somewhere like Montana? One word, or three letters rather: TEK.

I was far too interested now and didn't have time to bask in the bleakness that occupied too much of my time before. I now knew that Indigenous people like myself were right to see themselves as being one with Nature and not simply living amongst Nature. No matter how much modernity tries to separate us from Nature, we are still part of the Ecosystem, and there's beauty in that for me.

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Armed with a new outlook, I wondered, what is going on with all these Coyote stories? All of my reading showed that tribes had widely different stories about how

Earth or Humans came about. Even tribes within my confederacy had slight variations on the same story—but Coyote stories were always the same. Coyote was always a cunning, curious, cautious creature, but always a trickster. Often depicted as a deity who helped Humans, but would always come out on top if you tried to trick them. To the Salish, Coyote arrived before Humans on Earth. It laid the groundwork for Humans to live. It showed the Salish which foods to eat and how to prepare them. Coyote showed them how to survive off the Land in every season.<sup>6</sup> For the Nez Perce, Coyote was alone since all of its friends were sucked up into the belly of a giant monster on top of a Mountain. Coyote attached themselves with rope to the Mountain as to not also get sucked into the monster's belly. The monster realized it couldn't defeat the trickster, so it tried to befriend it. After a while of being friends Coyote asked to see inside the monster's stomach and the monster agreed. Coyote then climbed inside and set Fire inside the monster and released all its friends. It threw out chunks of innards in all four directions, and when the pieces landed, new tribes would spring up from the monster's flesh.<sup>7</sup> Humans, or anything for that matter, could never gain an advantage over Coyote as Napi once had. It was so curious that all these stories were so similar.

Maybe I can read the “real” history of this elusive trickster. Just as colonists didn't understand something like Fire, they too didn't understand the importance of predator species. Wolves for example whom Coyotes descended from had been extirpated from places like England, and in their folklore, the big bad Wolves always lived deep in the scary dense Forests. Some people literally thought that Wolves alone would halt the development of civilization in the New World.<sup>8</sup> So, the Wolves had to go. The majestic Wolf had nearly been completely wiped out by ignorance. There was an all-out war on



Wolves, as they were shot, trapped, poisoned, and hunted with Dogs for a good chunk of American history. Oh, the irony of using an Animal directly descended from the Wolf to hunt the Wolf.<sup>9</sup> Too bad the colonists never spoke to any of the tribes who saw the Wolf as sacred. Heck even my tribe believed that the Wolf guides Humans to the afterlife. The Wolf's trail we called the equally majestic Milky Way Galaxy. Fortunately, now we have my beloved science to back up how important Wolves are in the Ecosystem. Everything within the Ecosystem is so interwoven like a braid of Sweetgrass that removing one affects the rest.

It wasn't just Wolves though, everything had to go for some reason. Grizzly Bears, Black Bears, Mountain Lions, and Canada Lynx. This war on Nature was unfortunately succeeding as some of those species are still endangered or threatened to this day. This war was working to exterminate all of those species except one: *Coyote*. *But why?* I thought as I not only read through every book and paper I could get my paw-hands on, but also from talking to elders who are the keepers of knowledge. It turns out that Coyotes are simply very adaptable, just as my ancestors were. There are three main reasons why. For one, unlike the Wolves they descended from, Coyotes are omnivores.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, they have the ability to be either completely independent, roaming the Land and trying to test their luck with some trickery, or they can be completely social.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, they have an autogenic trait that allows them to survey their population size and to adjust their reproduction accordingly.<sup>12</sup> This means that every time you hear them yelp, howl, shriek and make all other kinds of noises, they are doing a kind of survey of their population numbers. If they don't get a response the females go

into estrus and can produce up to nineteen pups in one litter.<sup>13</sup> And there's beauty in that for me.

Imagine how frustrating it would be to be fully funded by the government to simply eliminate one simple species, but the more you kill, the more seem to spring up out of nowhere. Maybe they felt like Colonel Baker who despite massacring my ancestors, the Blackfeet lived on. Coyotes are the embodiment of the Hydra from Greek Mythology. When you cut the head off the Hydra, two more come back just like the Coyote. The word Coyote comes from the Aztec word *Cóyotl* meaning, of course, trickster.<sup>14</sup> Too bad these colonists didn't study their TEK, because they'd know how to cope with this myth-like Animal; simply leave them alone. Attempts to eradicate them obviously made more of them. A simple rule to Coyotes is, the more that are killed, even more will be born. A U.S. state would get word of Coyotes crossing into their coveted Lands, and they would take measures to try and kill them off before they would become too widespread—but you know where this is going. *How did I miss this?* This is a textbook example of the efficacy of traditional knowledge—but that text book hasn't been written, because it lives in the minds of the elders. It is passed down the generations and lives on, like the Coyotes.

It had come full circle for me. I am still a skeptical scientifically-minded pseudo-philosopher, but I now understand the importance of traditional knowledge. I'm skeptically-spiritual if such a thing exists, and believe the Universe is a beautiful thing. I recognize how oral traditions compliment the scientific method and was a necessity to live historically. While some academics criticize TEK as being anti-science, I have a feeling that those people have never lived science like I have. I try to learn as much as I

can about the topic. This in no way means that every story has truth to it, or are somehow transcendent knowledge. There are simply some stories that can be tested by modern science.

In the end the real history of the Coyote is very much a Coyote story, as they tricked two entire continents of Humans and is now in every single U.S. state except Hawaii, all across Canada, and down into Central and South America, all because people didn't listen to the Indigenous voices. Hopefully they'll listen to us on how to address the climate emergency. Coyote tricked us all, and I'm amused by that... And there's beauty in that for me.

## Traditional Ecological Philosophy

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) is a way for people to apply an Environmental philosophy in objective ways. It adds wisdom to science where many people seem to feel are two different domains. It provides the normative oversight to Environmental ethics. TEK is defined by the United Nations as "the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings."<sup>15</sup> TEK is a major contribution to the fields of ecology, anthropology, ethnobotany, and more. It spans millennia and Indigenous cultures have evolved with it out of necessity.

The study of TEK seems to be growing like a new garden both as an academic discipline, and in general. In 2021 the U.S. government for the first time issued a Memorandum of Agreement to all the government departments explaining how TEK is important not only for intergovernmental relations, but for environmental sustainability as well.<sup>16</sup> One shining example of TEK that has been used in the Americas for thousands of years is prescribed Fire. Many tribes burned swaths of Land which did many things from recycling nutrients, removing dead brush, clearing the Forest floor of debris, and clearing the Forest canopy to reduce Tree competition which enables Trees to grow bigger and healthier, and to be exposed to more Sunlight.<sup>17</sup>

As great as TEK is as a concept academically, I do feel that it is limited in its name, however. In philosophy we ask a lot of questions. But overall there are three questions philosophy looks to answer: *What is there? What could I know? and What*

*should I do?* That is: metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Philosophy is broken down into three branches like a healthy Tree where each branch is as equally healthy, important, and fruitful. In this sense, TEK would only fall under one branch, epistemology, which is the study of knowledge— but the reality is that TEK is the Tree itself. Traditional Ecological Knowledge is very much just as grounded in metaphysics and ethics as it is epistemology. In other words, TEK is taught as the *How* i.e. how Indigenous people gained knowledge and how they passed that knowledge down. What's missing are the *Why's* i.e. *why* Indigenous culture was inextricably linked to Ecological practices and why they still matter. Perhaps the problem could be addressed simply by using a more accurate term like Traditional Ecological Philosophy. Traditional Ecological Philosophy explains why Indigenous knowledge is important in the first place, it provides guidance on how to apply it in the real world to form a reciprocal relationship to everything in the Ecosystem, and how to share that knowledge, often encoded in stories.

We now have historical data about the modern World's neglect for Nature, evidenced by the Anthropocene and living in a mass extinction, and now researchers argue that (Indigenous) people and their Ecosystem are inseparable—but also, the loss of Ecodiversity happens at much less the rate on Indigenous territories than it does elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> Meaning Indigenous cultures are inherently more sustainable than the larger industrialized societies.

Examining those three branches from an Indigenous perspective, I think, is a healthy place to start in developing an ethic for the Environment, and we can do it without romanticizing Indigenous cultures, as they too have their flaws. But Indigenous

Ecological practices in particular are the one thing that is routinely substantiated by modern science, and I think it is largely what defines a culture as being Indigenous in the first place.

## Metaphysics

When a group has answers to questions pertaining to metaphysics (or sometimes ontology), epistemology, and ethics, they then have what's called an outlook,<sup>19</sup> and the Indigenous outlook is best told through stories. In terms of metaphysics Indigenous peoples all around the World have a fundamentally different outlook on Nature than the industrialized society. The spirituality of Indigenous peoples, often called animism and its practice, finds that everything is inherently animate and sacred as they all exist objectively. Nothing, especially Humans aren't superior to anything else, but are equal in our existence and are all interdependent.<sup>20</sup> Everything from Plants and non-Human Animals, to Mountains, Water, even Fire were all sacred and related. It has been noted that animism actually produces better treatment towards Nature<sup>21</sup>, and produces better health outcomes for the practitioners.<sup>22</sup> Indigenous scholars refer to the connection to all things as a kincentric outlook, which looks to actually maintain healthy relationships to everything. Robin Wall Kimmerer, an Indigenous scholar writes<sup>23</sup>

The omission of Indigenous practices [...] has its roots in the Western belief that humans are distinct from nature and that human intervention is

antithetical to 'unspoiled nature'. By contrast, in the indigenous view, human beings are part of nature...

The Western industrial World on the other hand, is very dualistic, and feels as if we're separate from the Natural World and lock ourselves inside. But no matter how much we try to separate ourselves from Nature, we are inherently dependent on things like clean Air and Water. Our bodies themselves are an Ecosystem; from most of it being made up of Water, to the minerals we need, and to the Bacteria in our guts which exist independently from us and yet are still a critical part of our survival.

When I think of this dualistic dichotomy, it reminds me of when I had social media, and everyone's profile, including mine admittedly, had to have some obligatory outdoorsy photos of hiking or being in the Mountains. The great outdoors are everything—or are they? Some people I know claim to hate one thing above all: being inside. It makes me think, what is it about being inside that people seem to hate so much? To me it seems like some of the most important things happen inside; from medicine, legislation, scientific discoveries, to writing and much more. That of course doesn't mean nothing special happens outside either, as it seems our evolution and wellbeing is dictated by our relationship to Nature and to each other.<sup>24</sup>

I'll be the first to admit that I think the great indoors are pretty awesome too. I enjoy having my own space to meditate, watch movies, or to research something I find interesting and valuable. I do try to balance that with the outdoors too. I go on walks regularly, which I have to for the sake of my Dog's wellbeing, and I try to truly live in the

moment during these times, basking in the Sunlight, and gazing upon the Mountains to the south and north of our usual walking trail in Missoula, Montana.

From an Indigenous perspective inside and outside are actually the same thing. And that Nature itself doesn't discriminate if you're inside or not. For example, if a Badger is inside its hole, is it truly "inside"? And by being in its hole, is it therefore, no longer in Nature? We tend to think that non-Human Animals are in Nature, regardless if they're in a hole, a burrow, the ocean, or a nest, but why doesn't that apply to a Human in an apartment in downtown Tokyo? A huge mega-city like Tokyo is still Nature, and an Ecosystem itself. That doesn't mean cities are a healthy Ecosystem, but an Ecosystem nonetheless. The Wilderness seems to be a place we go, and not a place where we are at all times.

It may seem trivial to have a dualistic outlook on Nature, but I argue that dualism alone is one of the single biggest contributors to the Environmental neglect of today. If we feel that Nature is this other thing that is big, scary, and somewhere else, then there really isn't a need to be concerned for its harmony and maintaining a relationship with it all.

This has largely been the predominant view for Humans that arguably started during the Agricultural Revolution, but certainly exacerbated during the Industrial Revolution.<sup>25</sup> Prior to the Agricultural Revolution, every society was by definition, Indigenous and had a deep connection to place—but at the advent of agrarian societies, divisions begin to spring up; divisions of labor, gender, age, sexuality, and ability etc. Nature only became valuable for what it could provide Humans. Soil is only valuable for



how many crops it could yield, Water is considered property and simply a resource,<sup>26</sup> non-Human Animals are bred for food, labor, and clothing.

Now of course we need agriculture in the modern World, but I think there is something to glean from Indigenous people on how to see the inherent worth for all of Nature and to feel like a part of it. Not to mention, there are Indigenous groups who practice agriculture, but do so without their losing their kincentric ethic.

### Epistemology

The transfer of knowledge today is mostly done through (scientific) literature and disseminating it in different ways, but it often lacks connection. Connection to each other, connection to the subject(s), and connection to place. Indigenous societies historically transferred knowledge through cultural practices and stories. Things were observed in Nature then tested and sampled, much like the scientific method today.<sup>27</sup> If something was useful enough it was stored in the “collective memory”.<sup>28</sup> After all, how did ancient people know the difference between which Plants were Food, which ones were poisonous, and which ones were Medicines? Once a tribe gained that knowledge, a set of normative practices pertaining to it was created, and sometimes a society within the tribe was created to codify and pass down the knowledge.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, these practices would promote the “collective Continuance”<sup>30</sup> of the entire Ecosystem. The stories told, speak of anything from how or when to harvest a Plant, how to collect Medicines, or how to navigate our local climate etc. Every tribe, it seems, has some kind

of lore, where the stories are embedded with lessons that could be passed down without the written record—Napi was that character for my tribe, the Blackfeet.

Napi was the first Human, and a trickster, and one day he was wandering about when he began to get very hungry. He came upon a River and as he gazed into the clear Waters he could see Berries at the very bottom. Napi had never seen Berries at the bottom of a River before, but they looked delicious, so it became his mission to reach them. Napi took off most of his clothes and jumped in the River, diving as deep as he could but to no avail. The River was deeper than he thought. He had a better idea and quickly gathered some materials. With some rope he tied a few large Rocks together and fastened them to himself. He was going to attempt to sink to the bottom to easily reach the Berries. Carrying the large Rocks in his hands he hobbled over to the bank just above the Berry bush and jumped in. Napi quickly sank right to the bottom. Once there, Napi opened his eyes but much to his dismay, there were no Berries in sight. Suddenly, Napi began to run out of air and he panicked. Napi began flailing around underwater trying to untie himself from the Rocks. Just as he felt life slipping away from him he managed to untie himself and quickly floated back to the surface. Napi climbed back onto the other side of the bank and laid in the Grass as he regained his breath. He looked next to him, and what he saw surprised and angered him. Napi saw that the Berry bush he was trying to reach at the bottom of the River was actually on the River bank itself. He had been looking at its reflection in the Water and thought it was at the bottom. He got so angry that he grabbed a stick nearby and hit the bush until all the Berries fell off. It is because of that story that to this day, the way to collect Bull Berries (*Shepherdia argentea*) is to put a blanket at the base of the bush and then

whack it with a stick until most of the Berries fall off, otherwise you will prick your fingers on the thorns of the bush. It's a simple message, but has some knowledge embedded within it.

There's a Napi story for almost anything within the Blackfeet's Ecosystem on how to interact with non-Human Animals, or about Plants, even on how not to mistreat Rocks. Imagine if the modern world felt you could mistreat Water or Mountains—we would probably feel differently about things like fracking or Mountain-top removal. Almost every tribe has a character like Napi. The Anishinaabe have Nanabosho,<sup>31</sup> the Lakota have Iktomi the Spider,<sup>32</sup> and many other tribes had their own character to learn from. I think it's safe to say these stories aren't literally true, but to practice their teachings has far reaching effects.

## Ethics

Since Indigenous people overwhelmingly see themselves as part of Nature itself, then subsequently, everything is included in the moral sphere. One concept often debated in environmental philosophy in particular is moral extensionism. Questions like *how far out should we extend our moral sphere? Or what makes something inherently worthy of moral status?* The West, being very dualistic, has had a hard time coming up with answers to such questions. Once Christianity dominated over the West, Humans felt they had dominion over all of Nature, and that became the standard view. Plus, if one feels that salvation comes after death, then there is not really a compelling reason to preserve the Planet in this life. To the West, Nature was seen as "...Depraved, an

object for exploitation and nothing more” says Vine Deloria jr., another Indigenous scholar.<sup>33</sup>

The Indigenous outlook on morality, however, reminds me of pitching a Painted Blackfeet lodge. Not every lodge is painted, but if they are it’s quite telling about the Blackfeet’s environmental ethic. At the base of a painted lodge are normally geometric shapes, usually symbolizing geological features. Rivers, Mountains, Hills, and often even Mushrooms. Blackfeet tipis always face east, this is both practical and cultural. The Sun greets us every morning, and prepares us for the day, a reminder of the diurnal creature we are. The next level up in the middle of the lodge is usually one of our non-Human Animal kin. After you receive your own lodge, within the first four nights you may dream of an Animal. The Animal that comes to you in this dream is what goes in this section. In a camp even today you may see Horses, Otters, Bears, or any number of our kin depicted with honor in the center of the tipi. In the back facing directly west, is a painted doorway for the Beaver, one of the most sacred of all. There is much to learn from this keystone species who improves the Land by increasing the Water table, reduces the impact of Wildfires, and creates habitat for terrestrial and aquatic species<sup>34</sup>—therefore, the Beaver is always welcome. The next level up is the highest point on the ear flaps on both sides of the front. The ear flaps do look like ears, and they control smoke acting as a chimney of sorts. On one side is the constellation of the Big Dipper, and the other is the Beehive Cluster constellation symbolizing our relationship to the Cosmos. Old stories talk of how these constellations were once Human children who were orphaned and eventually gained powers to become the Stars themselves.

After all, I find it interesting that many of the elements within our own bodies are made from Stars that died millions or billions of years ago.

Standing at the base of a tipi looking up at these paintings it may look hierarchical with the Soil at the very bottom and Humans being at the top, which seems to be how many people feel ethically about Nature today—but the interesting thing about pitching a tipi is that you always have to lay it out and measure it every time. When a Blackfeet tipi is fully laid out on the Ground, it forms a circle, and all of the paintings connect within the circle. Indigenous societies overwhelmingly see everything as circular and continuous, whereas the West is very linear. This is symbolic of our moral extension, that it expands to everything living and non-living equally. And thus, that is the kincentric outlook.

The questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics have been answered the same way for millennia by tribal people—and perhaps the modern World can learn from that outlook. Being kincentric though, also sees that we have relationships to things like viruses, parasites, or things often demonized like oil. This is analogous to how we may have members of our own family or community who've wronged us in some way and may not be the best people, but they are still our kin and are related to us in some way. Our relationship to them may require more management and boundaries than the closest ones to us. One myth about Indigenous societies historically was that we had no impact on the Ecosystem at all, but a closer inspection reveals that everything was very deliberately managed. We don't just benefit from healthy Ecosystems, we help to create them and to have a healthy balance between all

things like balancing a family dynamic, and we do that through management with Traditional Ecological Philosophy.

## Mind Under Matter

In the age of artificial intelligence, nuclear bombs, and smartphones it seems that many of our scientific inquiries have been answered. Yet, there is something so fundamental that is at the heart of our very existence that is essentially what it means to be a Human that has had almost no progress in understanding the question, and that is: *How is it possible that matter can produce consciousness?* The word consciousness is used in different ways. Sometimes consciousness is an antonym to being asleep, sometimes it's used by a boxing commentator to announce a fighter had been knocked unconscious, or it can be used as a synonym for intentionally doing something with focus. But the sort I'm interested in is that consciousness is ultimately what it's like to be something in terms of experience, to be a thinking thing—or more specifically, consciousness is the internal subjective experience that something can have. However, already a problem arises in speaking about a phenomenon like that in those terms. It is difficult to study consciousness objectively and scientifically, because consciousness is ultimately subjective—in fact it is subjectivity itself. The two main camps that try and reconcile this issue from a materialistic point of view argue that consciousness either emerges at some point or it is a fundamental property of matter itself.

The philosopher David Chalmers famously introduced the easy and hard problem of consciousness.<sup>35</sup> He certainly wasn't the first person to explore this phenomenon, far from it, but he was the first to put it into these terms that seemed to have stuck. The easy problem of consciousness is basically the work of psychologists and neuroscientists who have essentially mapped out the physics of the brain. It seems that

we have a growing body of evidence of neural correlates to know which emotions correlate with a particular region of the brain, or how exogenous chemicals can generally produce certain behaviors. We Humans have billions of neurons which transmit information to do something as simple as blinking, to more extremes like deciding to run for president of the United States. The hard problem on the other hand is explaining how it's possible for the subjective experience to exist at all. In other words, the fact that there is something that it's like to be *you*. Only you know what it's like to be you. I know what it's like to be me, but I don't know what it's like to be, say, Emily Wilding Davison,<sup>36</sup> for example. And I certainly don't know what it was like to be her when she martyred herself for the sake of suffrage rights.

I can't say for certain when I personally began to ask these kinds of questions, but I've always been a curious little creature. I remember being in an agriculture class during my undergraduate degree taught by someone who had a degree in philosophy, but had spent a career farming. The professor shared a story about declaring their major as philosophy at the University of Montana in Missoula. The professor turned in their paper to declare their major, and the person at the desk asked "Where are you from"? "The hi-line", my professor answered. Montana's Hi-line is U.S. highway 2 that runs from one end of the state to the other in the northern half with disparate towns and rolling plains for miles on end. "Yeah, we get a lot of you people from the hi-line studying philosophy" they replied. That's when it occurred to me, that there probably is a rough correlation between deeper thoughts and relative isolation. There're always those old stories of some sage isolating in a cave or on a Mountain for years only to emerge with some profound wisdom.



I experienced a bit of isolation growing up in the country on the Blackfoot Reservation, far from Missoula. Missoula is the eye of Montana. The eastern part of Montana is a square, both literally and figuratively. The western side is more interesting and looks like a face with a nose, brow, and chin. Missoula sits right where the eye is. My reservation is also on the western side of Montana adjacent to the Rocky Mountain-front to the west and the Canadian border to the north. It is where the Mountains meet the plains, and it is also where I laid in bed night after night, year after year not sleeping, but thinking. I had trouble sleeping my whole life and with no way to distract myself but to simply think; that and being relatively isolated in the countryside made me question everything, like the meaning of life, or the complexities of consciousness. I would toss and turn and let my thoughts spiral, which is probably not the healthiest thing for a developing mind. I had so many questions about life and existence, but lacked the answers.

Like most things, my fascination with the hard problem was a gradual one. I remember it was late 2007. My family and I were in Nanaimo, British Columbia. We were on a bit of a family trip to see my brother Jesse off, as he was heading to his permanent duty station in Iwakuni, Japan. Little did I know I wouldn't see him again for over four years, as I followed suit to join the Marine Corps two years later. Nanaimo is on the coast of Canada and we were admiring the Pacific Ocean on a boat dock. *It's so cold*, I thought to myself. The Water was shallow and the day was sunny and clear. I was walking on the dock back onto the Land when something so simple happened, something that has happened many times before and since that day but seemed different this time. As I was on the dock I noticed movement in the clear Water; I looked

down and in that same moment there was a Seal swimming gracefully underneath the dock. For just a split second we made direct eye contact looking deep into each other's being. Thinking back, it felt like an eternity, but it was only a second. *Hmm*, I wondered, what was that Seal thinking? Did they remember me after that day the same way I remembered them? Probably not, but now I think that there's almost certainly something that it's like to be a Seal in terms of an internal experience.

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Most people who study cognitive science generally feel that consciousness is an emergent property, as opposed to it being fundamental, or immaterial. If consciousness is emergent, it simply emerges *somewhere* or at *some point* from myriad processes in the brain and nervous system interacting with the physical World. Much like how oxygen on its own is just an atom, but at some point, it has the potential to take on two hydrogen atoms to form a covalent bond which emerges as Water. If consciousness emerges, the question is when or where? Where is the line between being a thinking thing, and just an amalgam of material makeup? Maybe we can examine our earliest memories and think that we simply became conscious at some point in our individual lives. My earliest memory was cutting my finger at a very young age. Even with crimson blood all over my little hand, for some reason I was afraid of the band-aid my sister was trying to put on it. I thought the band-aid would certainly be

more painful than the cut itself for some reason—but did I just become conscious at that point, or do I simply not remember anything before that?

Between seven months and a year, infants have some cognitive ability for attention, reaction time, and memory.<sup>37</sup> Between 18 months and two years, infants develop prosocial behavior like sharing resources (food), helping others, and comforting those in need.<sup>38</sup> This means that there is certainly *something* going on inside the mind of an infant. Again though, it's hard to say that they just became conscious at that moment, or maybe it's a gradual process much like my fascination with these questions. It gets controversial to keep going down that rabbit hole to ask if a fetus is conscious, or if sperm or an egg are conscious. I have no idea, but we can also examine the question going in the opposite direction.

Does our conscious state survive after death? Religious indoctrination has much of the World convinced that the mind and body are two independent substances that somehow interact, but have no evidence to support such claims. We often hear and read about near-death experiences. The thing to remember is that they are “near” death experiences. No one's ever been dead for two weeks, wakes up, stretches out their rigor mortis and says, “Have I got a story for you”. None of us remember before we were born, who's to say with evidence that consciousness exists after we cease being alive once again? I don't deny the possibility, it's just a heavy burden of proof that isn't supported with credible evidence at this point. Contrary to religious ideas It would also seem that even in the afterlife there would still be a level of suffering, knowing people on Earth are still experiencing terrible fates from famine, war, murder etc.

It's clear that an individual's experience is a physical phenomenon evidenced for example when people endure a traumatic brain injury, a parasite, neurodegenerative diseases, or undergo a lobotomy it can substantially change the entire person and their interaction with the objective World. I'm skeptical of any dualistic explanation, but remain open minded (no pun intended).

Lastly, we can simply ask, if there is a god or gods who put our souls into our bodies, why did they create Earth in the first place where everyone will inevitably suffer? Why not just create angels in heaven that would only experience infinite bliss and skip the suffering period? This is especially concerning since these gods apparently allow hell to exist when it doesn't need to and send their own creations there for all eternity for defying rules they created.

Generally, scientists fall on the emergent side of things, and some don't think there is a hard problem at all, only the easy problem but it's still difficult to understand when subjectivity emerges. As time passes people are becoming more accepting of non-Human Animals being more like us than we thought. Perhaps it is a reminder that we are actually more like them in our evolution. A new discovery demonstrates that Crows, part of the Corvid family of Birds generally accepted to be "intelligent" almost certainly have subjective experiences.<sup>39</sup> However, the interesting thing is that Mammals and Birds split in evolution over 100-million years ago.<sup>40</sup> This means that in evolutionary terms, sentience and internal experience goes back further in time than previously thought.

One hot summer day in 2019 I was walking through a neighborhood. I was working for a non-profit organization doing some Environmental work and registering voters. I encroached on a murder of Crows in a Tree and one in particular kept dive-bombing at me for at least three blocks, I guess to shoo me away. It would not let up despite my efforts to make peace. I wonder if it felt a sense of accomplishment that it chased an apex predator away. Maybe it was congratulated by its buddies right after. It's funny to think that a former U.S. Marine was chased away by a harmless Crow.

Ethically, I don't see what's wrong with treating non-Human Animals as if they *are* all conscious; Because if they are, then that means they can almost certainly suffer—but what about Plants or Fungi? Some Willows have formed a symbiosis with Beavers for example, where whenever a Beaver eats Willows the Tree can *sense* being eaten and rapidly changes its chemical profile which tastes bad to the Beaver. The Beaver will then move on leaving some Willows behind to carry on their survival. Some of the pieces of Willow float merrily down the Stream to create new patches and the cycle continues, and that is simply one example.<sup>41</sup>

Plants and Fungi certainly respond to stimuli. Not to mention what would eventually become Humans split from Fungi anywhere from 600 million to a billion years ago.<sup>42</sup> They are *aware of something*—but can they suffer? And if so, what will people like me, who try to only eat Plants, eat knowing this? Maybe one day we will have completely synthesized food and maybe the experience of eating it will taste amazing. It could be the case that consciousness comes in degrees and is simply nothing more than the ability to process and integrate information. A Human brain can easier process and integrate information than a single-celled organism, and if it's even possible for an

abiotic feature like a Rock to process information, it would most likely be to a much less degree than an organism.

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The second group of thinkers on the subject feel that consciousness is fundamental—meaning that consciousness is a fundamental property of matter itself. Much like in physics, some things are fundamental like space/time, charge, or mass. It may actually also be the case that consciousness, or some property of it is also fundamental; this view is referred to as panpsychism. Because, one issue with emergence is that it simply means that somethings simply grasped consciousness at some point when the ability to be conscious might have already been there all along. That's analogous to an antenna picking up a radio signal, whereas consciousness is the signal and not the antenna.

Another problem with emergence is it still only tells us that some things *are* conscious, but doesn't tell us what it's like to *be* conscious or how it arises in the brain. Put another way, as great as physics is as an academic discipline for understanding the Universe, it only tells us what things *do* from the outside but doesn't tell us what things *are* in and of themselves from the inside. It could be the case that there is *something* that it's like to be an atom in terms of experience. It could be that oxygen atoms make a conscious effort to form with those hydrogen atoms to create a Water molecule, even

though it may only be a glimmer of what it's like to be a Human, for example. This in no way implies that every grain of salt or a wrist watch is conscious, or that other things are conscious in the same way Humans are, but again, merely that conscious could be a fundamental property of matter.

Panpsychism is a belief that is certainly more speculative and interesting than emergence or dualism. In a lot of ways, I feel that it is more aligned with Indigenous ideology. That places were sacred because there is something it's like to be a River or a Mountain. This is certainly integrated into Indigenous languages that are predominately verb based.<sup>43</sup> The language we speak influences our Worldview, and our languages imbue everything with personhood as opposed to simply being objects.<sup>44</sup>

I am certainly not a panpsychist, but I act as if it is true; I feel like it could produce an Environmental ethic that treats everything with moral regard. Imagine how Humanity would feel about something like hydraulic fracturing if we felt that we were literally making the Earth suffer by those actions. I'm not married to the idea of panpsychism, and in fact, if we could debunk it with scientific certainty, then that would mean we've made a major discovery into the Nature of consciousness. It would also be a fallacy to think we ought to treat everything as having sentience simply because people have always done that, and instead we could act as if that is the case as a hypothesis and apply the scientific method to falsify such a radical claim.

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One doesn't have to wonder about these questions long to realize that it can be a little scary. After all, how do we know that anyone else is even conscious? Everyone and everything could just be a figment of our imagination. The so-called solipsists believe this idea, and it blurs the line between an interesting philosophy and a profound mental illness. Speaking of illness, and suffering, that is also a product of consciousness. As beautiful as the subjective experience is, it can also be the very source of unfortunate circumstances. From depression and anxiety to extreme personality disorders which can make one question their entire reality. Abraham for example, perfectly describes what it's like to have schizophrenia; Joan of Arc vividly explains what the internal experience of having epilepsy is like.

In the seminal movie *The Matrix*, after the main character, Neo is liberated from a complex computer simulation, he's speaking to his mentor, Morpheus in a computer construct. Neo attentively touches a chair and asks, "This isn't real?" To which Morpheus responds, "What is real? How do you define real? If you're talking about what you can feel, what you can smell, taste, and see then "real" is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain." There's no way to know for sure if we're living in a complex simulation or if anyone else is even "real". Even all the evidence we could compile to demonstrate that we aren't living in a computer could itself be simulated. It seems possible that if we keep progressing technologically, that something like *The Matrix* could be possible—but we can't be certain if it already happened or not.

I wonder now if Humans could engineer consciousness, not just as we do with babies but if we could program it into a machine. Maybe that's the easiest way to



understand how the phenomenon arises, or if that conscious entity could download its consciousness and upload it elsewhere onto another device. Maybe we could build an algorithm that's more intelligent than Humans in every way, that it builds its own consciousness without the glitches like mental illness. Maybe a machine would understand that consciousness is maladaptive and would understand that to be sentient would inevitably mean it could suffer.

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Rest assured, the simulation argument is basically faith-based, and is essentially a new religion for secularists and technocrats. Even if we somehow discover we are in a simulation, we've still made objective discoveries about the Universe. To think we could simulate something like consciousness assumes we (or something else) has cracked the code of the hard problem. Even if our minds and thoughts were being controlled by some overlords that put us in the simulation, there would still be a subject to control. In other words, the one thing we can't deny is that we *are* conscious. Consciousness is the one thing in the entire Universe that cannot be denied—even to deny consciousness as some do, requires conscious effort. This is the one thing Descartes got right with his famous proclamation *Cogito Ergo Sum (I think, therefore, I am)*.<sup>45</sup> Nothing is more true than the first-person experience no matter how strange the Universe might be. It's also very important to point out that in no way does it seem that consciousness is something beyond scientific discovery. And even though it is almost certainly a material phenomenon, consciousness is still an amazing gift to poses.

Perhaps one of the single most useful experiences out there, and one that many thinkers on this topic have overlooked is essentially what's referred to as self-transcendence or ego death, because it demonstrates that consciousness isn't what we tend to think it is in our daily experience of the World. It's such a bizarre experience that writing or speaking about it doesn't do it justice. In fact, calling it an experience is a bit of a paradox, because it is the lack of experience itself. In essence, this is largely the distinction between East and West in terms of ideological foundation, and it's something that the West has largely never really grasped. Almost every major yogi or mystic for millennia in the East, however, has made it their work to show that this is legitimately a real experience that people can have.

The phenomenon of self-transcendence can be achieved in different ways, but is in large part the overall goal of something like meditation. People seem to think that meditation is sitting motionless and completely clearing one's mind. Five seconds of meditation demonstrates that that's nearly impossible; thoughts will immediately invade one's own privacy. To simply not identify oneself with said thoughts, and to simply watch their thoughts rise and wither away like a Flower pedal is an easier approach. To do this long enough over and over ad infinitum, one can literally lose their sense of self temporarily, and simply become one with everything in the present moment. Self-transcendence enables one to go from continuously having experience to simply being experience. Ego death is extremely important because it tells us quite possibly the most important thing about consciousness—while consciousness may be the one thing that cannot be an illusion, our sense of self almost certainly is. Much like how our sense of

taste or smell seem to wither away if we don't pay sufficient attention to them, so too does that apply to our sense of being an I or a me.

If everyone realized this, it could potentially bring us closer to everything. From Plants, non-Human Animals, Water, and to the very Planet itself and beyond because it dissolves the border between being an individual, to being one with everything. The problem is that phenomena like this have been also imbued with many unfounded claims that makes it harder to study them scientifically like our sense of self is part of an immaterial soul, or that the self persists after death—but it just so happens that this one claim of self-transcendence is substantiated by modern science that our sense of self is literally an illusion.<sup>46</sup> There isn't a single place in the brain where our sense of self is hiding, and is simply made up by the totality of the brain and nervous system itself that has evolved for billions of years and the experiences from moment to moment in relation to the external World.

I've been meditating for years, and have had some breakthroughs along the way. However, the experience of self-transcendence is rare for me. It's most easily achieved through sensory deprivation, also called float therapy or REST (Restricted Environment Stimulation Therapy). I had first heard of this around 2012 while ironically still in the Marine Corps. A friend introduced it to me who prior to joining was a self-described "dirty hippie". You'd be surprised at some of the people who join the military and the various reasons for doing so. Some wanted health care, others wanted citizenship, or the GI Bill to pay for college. As for me I was someone always experimenting with getting out of my comfort zone like when on weekends my barracks

room became a den to casually drop acid, or any number of substances to self-medicate through the stress we were under.

Floating was another way to cope with the everyday stress and exhaustion. By now I realize I have a range of experiences floating, the most profound being, well, self-transcendence. I call it entering the void. It all happens, again, from isolation, like the isolation I had experienced growing up in the country. For maybe five minutes or so, I really do notice my senses begin to melt away. The Water is roughly the same temperature as your body, and there is more salt in each tank than I've ever noticed in any ocean. With the combination of buoyancy and no visual or auditory stimuli my mind begins to enter a void. Sometimes I'm almost there and a simple thought will jolt me back to awareness, much like when I'm trying to sleep at night. But then I just start over, not attaching to thoughts, I lose sense of everything and then boom—the lights come on and a whole hour or so is gone in an instant, and there's nothing in between the initial five minutes and an hour later. After each float I feel like I need to be reintegrated into being a thinking thing again for a brief moment.

Nonexistence is an interesting idea. It is the only absence of true suffering, as I feel the common denominator for suffering is our sense of self and thoughts in general. In that state, or lack of state, there is no worrier to worry, there is no sufferer to suffer—and yet some people are afraid of the idea. If that's all that happens at death, then that's comforting to me now.

Sometimes, it's hard to get to that state and you basically just lay in a pool of Water for some time with racing thoughts. There are some interesting data on the relaxation and wellbeing of floating about improved sleep, reduced pain, less stress and

anxiety etc.<sup>47</sup> However, the qualitative experiences are hard to, well, quantify. If I float consistently, I get a resurgence of long-lost memories of the most trivial and random experiences in the past. Anecdotally, I've heard others say the same thing. It's just fascinating that those memories are still in there, locked away somewhere in our memory bank and something like floating can bring them back.

Maybe one day people in the future will look back and think *Our ancestors were so close to fully understanding consciousness*, and that they have figured it out with certainty. It seems that no matter how far consciousness extends and how it arises, consciousness is simply the ability of the universe to be aware of itself.

## Medicine: An ode to Innocence

In Blackfeet culture medicine isn't just a noun, but also a verb. Medicine isn't just something you take, it can also be something you do. But one can develop an unhealthy relationship with something that was once medicinal to them if they're not mindful enough. Medicine can treat the body and mind, but it must not be misused. To be Indigenous is to be a part of something larger than oneself like a tribe that is connected to place, and honor can be found in bringing good medicine to a cause.

I joined the Marine Corps in 2009 as naïve kid from the reservation looking for adventure. The military seemed like a rite of passage for someone who comes from a warrior culture, and from a family who has a long line of veterans before them. Checking into 2nd Amphibious Assault Battalion in 2010 was a surreal experience. It was my first time on Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. It was also where my grandfather was stationed whose identity was largely forged by being a Marine Corps sniper in WWII. It was early winter and everything was dead; the Grass, the Leaves, and every other Marine's ambition. Military movies only ever show one of two things; boot camp and/or *the war*—but never the majority of the experience, which is every-day life in the fleet after all of your initial training is complete. Life quickly becomes mundane as it simply feels as you're working a day-job and all anyone wants to do is to fantasize about getting out of the military. We had to check into the division, the battalion, our company, and eventually, our platoon. At each stop we were briefed on the do's and don'ts. One brief in particular was memorable. Gunnery Sergeant Gibbs stood long and lanky before us with a large dip of chewing tobacco in his bottom lip. "Welcome to Courthouse Bay"

(one of the areas on Lejeune) he said, “you’ll either become super religious, an alcoholic, or a gym rat for the rest of your time here.” I would eventually choose the third option. Gibbs on the other hand would be discharged for some truly horrific crimes. I don’t know all the details to share the story, but he was also in charge of the drug testing program for our battalion, and rumor had it you could slide him some cash and he’d take you off the testing roster.

One may not think it, but the U.S. military has a drug problem.<sup>48</sup> It honestly makes sense since any job in the military is coupled with a chronically stressful Environment, and drugs can be a form of escapism and a coping mechanism, especially for those struggling with trauma from the two wars we were still very much a part of at the time. Back then I had no idea what a coping mechanism even was, let alone healthy ones. Trauma and stress were everywhere in Marines, thick enough for you to cut through it with a bayonet. It was the elephant in the room that nobody talked about. It was the scar across Gunnery Sergeant Wallace’s face, it was the multiple psych ward visits for Sergeant Sykes, and it was the alcoholism in Corporal Samuel. Corporal Samuel was burdened by guilt. His best friend triggered an Improvised Explosive Device meant for a vehicle in Afghanistan and was blown out of existence. Samuel always said he remembers the scene in perfect detail, and he could paint it if he wanted to. He had to pick up hundreds of pieces of what used to be his best friend. He would only talk about this experience if he was drinking, but he drank almost every day and blamed himself for the death.

Like anyone, a lot of my trauma goes back to childhood, especially growing up in a tough place like Browning Montana. At around six years old I nearly drowned in a pool

until a stranger pulled me to safety, later as an adolescent I pulled a friend to safety from nearly drowning himself from falling through the ice on a Creek. Those feelings would resurface in the military since our job in the Corps required us to be in the Water a lot. The saying in the military is that Water is the great equalizer. It doesn't matter if you're a billionaire CEO, or a fitness guru, doing anything intense in cold Water can make a coward out of anyone. Each year we would be dumped in the Ocean and would spend the next hour or so swimming back to shore. Another time we were being shoved into a helicopter that gets submerged and inverted as you have to learn how to egress as it is upside down in the Water. While other jobs perform more intense exercise in the Water, our job was certainly dangerous, as these experiences culminated in the death of Sergeant Rice. Our job was operating a 26-ton obsolete amphibious vehicle where if it went down, you went down with it. This was the first time, but not the last time I watched someone die. It was a simple exercise, but he went below the surface never to return, down into the deep depths of the ocean. The most haunting part of the experience is that soon after, everyone went about their day as if nothing happened. Years later, I became CPR certified and the first night of my certification, I dreamed I pulled Sergeant Rice from the Water and resuscitated his body. More recently a similar mishap resulted in the death of eight Marines and one Sailor, the oldest of which was only 22 years old.<sup>49</sup> They had the same job I had, and so, some of my stress was warranted. Of course, my experience pales in comparison to someone like corporal Samuel, but trauma is relative, and I think my childhood experience is also unique being raised on a reservation by addicts, surrounded by generational trauma and unhealthy coping mechanisms.



While I experimented a bit, I knew substances weren't going to be part of my identity to cope with my military stress, but something else was, working out. From a very young age, I would get hyper obsessed with doing one thing physically repetitiously ad nauseam. Around the age of eleven I got obsessed with doing sit-ups, and would do hundreds at a time until I would develop a sore on my lower back. Of all the branches, the Marine Corps maintains the highest fitness and body weight standards done daily through physical training (PT). This translates into waking up around 5am and doing anything from swimming, hiking, grappling, lifting weights, and always running and running and running. We ran in formation, and the formations always wreaked of cheap booze and cigarettes, and wild stories from the previous night. You were lucky to get six hours of sleep a night. Even at the time I felt that we did PT entirely too much and too hard to the point where our bodies were breaking down and not recovering—but ironically, to cope with this I would work out even more when our work day was complete. There wasn't really anything else to do in Courthouse Bay. We needed to be at the coast since our job was amphibious, so we were miles from civilization. There was a liquor store, a chow hall, and a gym. The gym is where I exercised my body and my demons. I had no idea at the time, but I quickly became addicted to working out. It's a strange addiction because I feel society enables the behavior and reinforces it. Society tends to demonize people addicted to food or cocaine for example, but praise people like bodybuilders who ironically tend to die young from complications that may be a result from the addiction.

I joined the Corps at a slim 160 pounds, but got out at 220 with barely any body fat as a result of this addiction. Lifting weights was no longer my medicine as my ego

was getting larger than my muscles. I *Had* to go to the gym regularly and had to force myself to leave. Exercise is certainly healthy for people, but one can develop an unhealthy relationship to something that is essential. This unhealthy relationship was spilling into other parts of my life. I was developing unhealthy relationships to other things from sex, alcohol, and drugs like Dextromethorphan (DXM). Any addiction can hurt people's relationships, and mine certainly did, as I would much rather lift weights than develop effective communications skills for my relationships. I was beginning to miss events, or on vacation, I would quickly find the nearest gym. I always felt that if someone ever said or did something that upset me I could get back at them by working out very hard. Or if I mistreated someone, I could punish myself at the gym to even the score. In hindsight, maybe some of it was getting dangerous, because I wasn't just lifting weights, but sometimes spending up to two hours in the sauna, sometimes nearly passing out from the heat. I knew I couldn't sustain this behavior much longer.

According to the U.S. government, around ten percent of Americans experience addiction.<sup>50</sup> These figures are most likely very low, as for the longest time, behavioral addictions like work, gambling, or internet use weren't included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) until recently. This includes so called "positive addictions" like exercise, clean eating, yoga, or meditation etc.<sup>51</sup>

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In the summer of 2013 just after I got out of the Marine Corps I stumbled into one of the most meaningful connections I've ever made. It was my first cousin, Nick. We certainly knew each other, but we didn't *know* each other like family members should. Nick was a few years older than I, and I only remember hanging out with him once or twice as kids. He's one of the most compassionate and up-beat people I know who leaves you with a very positive mindset after interacting. We began having deep conversations about life and healing and such, and he would ask about my time as a Marine. There were things gained and lost from my time in the military, as I feel being a good Marine and being a decent person are mutually exclusive. The Marine Corps was certainly one of the most effective fighting forces the World had ever seen, attested to by people like our grandfather, but you don't claim a title like that with hugs and smiles, but with decades of violence and warfare. I got out more resentful, rebellious, and critical of the U.S. military—and felt as if I lost my childhood innocence struggling with guilt. It's very common for addicts to be burdened by guilt, which was true for me. It's also common for addicts to feel like bad people as a result of their endless pursuit of their use; one saying in the sobriety community that helps keep me afloat is, "I'm a good person but a bad addict." I shed part of myself like a snake slithering through society aimlessly from addiction around that time.

Nick was also finding his way. At the time he was healing from a relationship that was no longer working despite sharing a child between them. Nick had an interesting way to heal from his experience, he has an official card from the Native American Church and can legally prescribe Psilocybin (magic) Mushrooms. Although, it seems that the only psychoactive substance in use according to the Native America Church

itself is Peyote (Mescaline).<sup>52</sup> He told me of his experience with his medicine where he was waiting for some kind of a message, and just before the Sun set behind the Mountains, he heard a vivid voice say, “Just love.” *Just love*, that’s it! I thought. Our word in Blackfeet for Mushrooms is the same word for Stars, he told me. There’s certainly *Something* going on with Mushrooms in Blackfeet culture, as they appear in iconography regularly, and are considered sacred. *But why would they share the same name as Stars of all things?* I thought. I had dabbled with psychedelics before, but never with the intention of using them as medicine.

I was still trying to reconcile my experience from joining the Marine Corps when we began having these conversations. Around that time, I began reading peer-reviewed research about the potential that some psychedelics had for things like depression, addiction, and PTSD. Researchers now say we’re living in a psychedelic renaissance.<sup>53</sup> There are however, some very serious caveats when discussing, and certainly ingesting psychedelics that are often overlooked. Aside from the renaissance, experts also argue we’re also in a mental health crisis, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic seeing rises in depression and anxiety. One potential treatment for *some* patients in rare cases are psychedelics.<sup>54</sup> In fact, many of these substances were discovered by Indigenous people even thousands of years ago—but the problem now is that they are ironically schedule I controlled substances in the U.S. believed to have no benefits at all and high risk of dependency by the government.<sup>55</sup> Psilocybin is put into the same category with other substances that are also being studied like LSD, Peyote, Cannabis, MDMA. Although this research was fascinating to me, I wasn’t quite ready for the medicine as I

felt like I still needed working out to help me transition back into a civilian lifestyle, which was a harder transition than I anticipated.

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In 2015 I was all in on the therapeutic potential of the Mushrooms as I dreaded walking into the gym day after day. We went back-and-forth about where to share this experience, and we quickly agreed on the Badger Creek/Two Medicine area, just under the Rocky Mountain front. The setting is almost medicinal in its own right.

The Badger Creek/Two Medicine (B2M) is one of the single most sacred areas to the Blackfeet. It is known as *The Crown of the Continent* or *the backbone of the world*.<sup>56</sup> Its sacredness is best exemplified in its traditional name *Natoo Kio Kasin* (Two Medicine Lodges). A medicine lodge represents the pinnacle of Blackfeet ceremonies when the whole tribe comes together for fasting, dancing, and celebrations. Normally there is only one lodge at a time, but the area was special enough to host two simultaneously. The Blackfeet temporarily ceded the mineral rights in 1895, but maintained the use rights for the 130,000-acre sprawl.<sup>57</sup> The area is adjacent to the Blackfeet Reservation, Glacier National Park, and the Lewis and Clark National Forest in north-western Montana.<sup>58</sup> The area is also home to many sensitive species like Mountain Goats, Westslope Cutthroat Trout, Canada Lynx, Bull Trout, Bald Eagles, Wolves, Wolverines, and a Caddisfly that hasn't been discovered anywhere else in the world called the *Rhyacophilan* Caddisfly.<sup>59</sup>

On top of that the Waters flow into and feed the Marias River.<sup>60</sup> But on that day, it was the perfect place for the powerful medicine.

It was early afternoon when we took the medicine baked into chocolate bars on a smooth summer day in August. “Mmm, mmm”, Nick said as he ate the chocolates as he tends to repeat himself. Shortly after we embarked on the journey into the vast Landscape, crossing train tracks, creating our own trail through thick Forests, and miles into the middle of nowhere. After about a half-hour I wasn’t feeling anything, but saw something—a Human-like figure walking some distance away *Is this a hallucination?* I thought, “Let’s go talk to that person”, said Nick. We raced to catch up to the mysterious figure. And when we got there it was none other than Nick’s first cousin, Sorelle on his other side of his family. “What the fuck are you guys doing way out here?” Sorelle asked. “The same as you, apparently”, we responded. We didn’t tell him about the medicine, but we were beginning to feel the initial wave before we knew we needed to continue on. Psilocybin to me does have distinct waves that fall over you as the experience begins to intensify, and the first was just beginning.

We carried on and found the most pristine sanctuary overlooking a Riparian area in the opening of a Pine Forest wonderland. The Rocky Mountains stood tall just behind us to the west. The first wave makes you feel lifted, laughing at the most basic things, and the colors become the most vibrant they’ve ever appeared. There was laughter, there was joy, there was intensity, and there was awe found in the present bliss. Time seemed to become more fluid just as the second wave hit. I had the most intense desire to roll all over in the Dirt and felt as if me and the Earth itself shared the most loving embrace; to which Nick said much to a round of laughter, “Hey, you look pretty dirty”.

That would later become an inside joke—but what wasn't a joke from that was an inseparable connection I made to the B2M that day.

The next two waves got even more intense and is something people need to take seriously—but eventually the medicine wore off. *Was I changed? Did it work?* I thought as I tried to go to sleep that night. It certainly worked for me literally overnight, as I don't think I worked out once the whole next year. It was almost miraculous on how effective it was with only one treatment. I went from forcing myself to leave the gym to now forcing myself to go, and feel as if I regained a healthy relationship with my medicine from that one experience. And yet, I still felt as if there was work to rebuild myself, because despite not having the compulsion for working out for example, I still struggle with things like guilt and strained relationships. I thought I could strengthen my relationship, not just to the people I hurt, but also to places like the B2M

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The B2M has been mired in controversy since the Reagan administration illegally issued 51 oil and gas leases in the area. They were illegal since for one, the Blackfeet were never consulted, and the area has been designated a Traditional Cultural District under the National Historic Preservations Act.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the area is a place for religious refuge and Indigenous religious freedom is inseparable from the Land. Fortunately, to date there has been no drilling in the area, as it has been caught up in litigation, bouncing from one administration to the next like a beach ball. It makes

me think though, maybe the World at large struggles with addiction. An insatiable addiction to oil and fossil fuels. But maybe society's addiction has become so desperate for its fix that our country resorts to violence for a constant supply to inject the precious resource into our planes, trains, and automobiles. The veins of society are fueled by oil and fossil fuels. Much like anything though, oil isn't inherently bad. If anything, the discovery of oil was a good thing, since Whale oil was being used to "light up America."<sup>62</sup> Whale oil had many uses and was the fifth largest industry in the U.S. in the mid nineteenth century killing thousands of Whales each year.<sup>63</sup> As for oil, it too was once the living Flora and Fauna of the Lands, millions of years into a past long forgotten.<sup>64</sup> This is where the term "fossil fuel" comes from. But it seems that modernity has created an unhealthy relationship to the lifeblood of society, and our dependence is becoming extreme. *Is there a medicine for this dependence for the entire world?* I think.

There are current efforts at the federal level to protect the B2M in perpetuity.<sup>65</sup> The B2M isn't just one tribe's fight for an area, it represents a microcosm of a much bigger issue. That Indigenous people around the World have a bond to something bigger than themselves worth fighting for. There are legislative efforts to create completely new designations that would classify the area as a Cultural Heritage Area.<sup>66</sup> This has the potential to set a new precedent for other groups to follow suit. The B2M became my mission, just as it was for some of my fellow tribal members who've fought for it since before I was born. I wanted to give back to the B2M but was waiting for the right moment. In 2019 I was on the board of a non-profit organization that canvassed door-to-door to collect public comment cards to send to the then Secretary of the



Interior to withdraw the remaining leases in the area. I quickly realized these efforts weren't very effective, but I felt like I could personally offer more to the area.

I wanted to bring medicine to myself and to my tribe like the warriors always did, and was no longer hooked to sex, drugs, and a rockin' bod. I feel as though we all make mistakes, but it is how we acknowledge them, and build ourselves back up from there that is a testament of a person. This was my opportunity to fully pick myself up from the floor and set my guilt and shame aside. My plan was simple—yet not really. On roughly the 40th anniversary of the issuing of the leases in 2022 I concocted a plan to endure 40 marathons, one for each year this was an ongoing fight. On top of that I was going to do it fasted and without any food, why? It was an added layer of sacrifice. This process was emblematic of how sometimes I think it is necessary to put your body in front of the machine, literally and figuratively; extraction in this instance is certainly the machine.

I was largely inspired by friends who literally put their bodies in front of extractive machines to protect the Missouri River at Standing Rock. I love having a very clear, tangible goal that I can achieve purely with discipline. I figured I could use my medicine for something good, to bring attention to a fight for the ages. Originally, I was going to go public with it but have had bad experience with that in the past. In 2019 I did a seven-day solidarity fast for the youth-led climate strike. A friend issued a press release and it got put on the front page of the local newspaper in Missoula. This made it more about me than the youth-led movement, and I realized during the fast that it's fairly common and honestly easy to fast for seven days, so it was a little embarrassing more than anything, so I hadn't gone public this time around.

Between August and December though, rain, snow, or shine I set out to finish what I started. My first time running a marathon I thought I broke my foot, and my legs literally couldn't run anymore, so I had to walk for most of it. This was probably only my third time running in the past ten years. I realized that I could row some of the marathons on a rowing machine since I've honestly hated running my whole life. Rowing a marathon for me takes over four hours and is just as hard as running, so I figured it was equivalent. Employees at the gym would walk by periodically, then ask, "What are you doing?" with a bewildered look on their face. I never really came up with a good answer that was brief.

These efforts were different from when I had to force myself to leave gyms, because now I had to force myself to do it. To ease the suffering, I would listen to relevant podcasts about anything ecological to try and better educate myself during this time. The hardest part was actually finding time for all of these since I worked and was a full-time grad student at that time. I put it in my mind that I'd need to finish before the end of the year. I started to do some of the marathons on the assault bike, which in all honesty, isn't very hard, but on the bike, I could do two or three at a time. A friend once told me, "sometimes healing itself is painful, but sometimes that pain is necessary." I used that time to reflect on the mistakes I'd made throughout my life and wanted to come out the other side a better person.

It's difficult talking about *extreme* challenges, because it seems that there is always somebody who's endured more extreme circumstances than you. But this also applies to trauma. It seems that no matter how bad one has it, someone else has had it worse—but trauma is unique to the individual and it doesn't help to compare to other's

experience. Trauma manifests differently in people. For me it was being diagnosed with both PTSD and Generalized Anxiety Disorder that I realized that my medicine was serving a purpose larger than myself, and this was one way to do it. I feel like trauma is like a cracked foundation: with a fractured foundation, you have a few options to manage it. You could ignore it and build stories on top of it, but the more you build the less stable the building is. The structure might get so unstable that one day it all comes crashing down with a major episode; You could never address it, and it may never collapse, but the structure spent its entire existence on shaky grounds, or you could slowly start to remove some layers to eventually mend the foundation, and start to rebuild a better structure for the remainder of its short time on this Earth.

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Of course, a question that needs to be asked is, *how does my efforts even help the cause?* Maybe it doesn't at all, but it makes sense in the ecology of my mind. What's harder than doing marathons for me is watching entire species go extinct, and doing nothing about it. Maybe our elected officials will realize the importance of places like the B2M, or Bears Ears, or anywhere around the World, and maybe that comes down to the personal sacrifices people make for a better future. This was a way for me to at least feel like I was doing something for the cause.

By late December time was running out, and I found myself stuck in Chicago on a personal trip, unable to fly home due to weather conditions. I was able to do some of the work there, and by the time I finally came back, I had developed a cold. I wasn't

going to let a cold get the best of me and pushed on, finally finishing the mission with just a day or two to spare. And yet nothing has changed. I am, of course, only one small component to a much larger issue, but I simply did my part I feel. But that's what's beautiful about being from a tribe with a shared identity is that we could all do our part, and it adds up to something larger than any one of us.

The Badger Creek/Two Medicine area is many things; it is home, it is sacred, it is oil and gas, it is Plants and Animals, and it is both a snapshot into history and a window into the future, and for me it helped to treat an addiction. It seems to be better understood now that things like addiction are a manifestation of unresolved trauma. Some scholars now argue that the opposite of addiction isn't necessarily sobriety, but connection.<sup>67</sup> As a social species that generally means a connection to each other, but it can also be to a cause, or a place. My connection is to my tribe and to the Badger Creek/Two Medicine ever since that day when I nestled myself into the embrace of the Earth. I've been sober now for years, and can see with clear eyes the role Indigenous people are playing in how to appropriately live with Nature and not bending Nature to our desire. There are many things our governments can do to address the climate crisis; degrowth, regenerative agriculture, renewable energy etc. But above all, those are worthless without meaningful connection to all things. And that is good medicine.

“We’re not playing god, it’s more like we’re creating god”

—Anonymous

## Uncle Ted’s Cabin

“There’s a buck right there, can I shoot it?”, asked Shadow.

“Fuck yeah, go ahead.” I responded.

The shot rang out, dropping the Mule Deer instantly. The closer we got, the more we realized how undead the Deer was, flailing, flopping, and foaming at the mouth desperately hanging on to the sanctity of life.

“I’ll finish it off with my pistol,” Shadow says.

Boom...Boom. Two shots to its head still failed to put it out of its misery. It began to move even more vigorously and violently than before as the ground blanketed in bright red blood.

“Damn. Guess I’ll use my knife,” he said, as he reached for his belt.

*This will finally be the end*, I thought. Shadow slit its throat, but much to our surprise, it still wouldn’t die. It lay there gurgling and twitching in agony, at that point I turned my back and quit watching. I had seen scenarios much like that many times, but this time seemed different.

It was 2015, and by that time I had given up hunting, but still brought friends on private hunts on my family’s Land as it was an excuse for me to spend a few days in the Mountains. I would soon give up consuming meat altogether because of experiences like that and learning more about the welfare of other species. I used to love hunting. It

was never about killing Animals, it was more about bonding. Bonding with vast Landscapes high up in the Mountains, on Grassy Plains, in the thick conifer Forests. In the fall, in the winter, and in the prime of my ignorance. But it was also about bonding with family. In hindsight I realize that hunting was really the only way I ever bonded with my father. But the bonds I was making were at the expense of the suffering of sentient beings. From then on, I wanted to further develop even more bonds with the whole Ecosystem.

A couple years earlier in 2013 I was experiencing my own suffering with the struggle of transitioning out of the Marine Corps and back into civilian life. The last two years of my enlistment, all I wanted was to get out, and when I finally got out I was in a vulnerable state of mind like many veterans. I had no direction to go. I was partying all night, sleeping in late, had no job, still very much an addict, and was couch-surfing with friends to save money. I figured I could give myself a simple daily task to clear my mind since I had nothing else to look forward to. I was always interested in meditation, but finally decided to develop a strict regimen.

Everyday anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour I'd spend focusing on the present moment—not latching on to my thoughts and trying to leave behind the life I used to live as a trained killer. I did this with consistency for the next two years or so until one day everything changed. One day I sat down, crossed my legs, and began my daily meditation just like every day. After a while my mind presented images of people I know dearly; family, friends, and beautiful places. I then felt something I truly had never felt before; complete unconditioned love. A warmth of bliss and serenity. A welcomed burst of sublime. Instantly I began to cry for the first time since I could remember. To

this day, words fall short, but it was profound and powerful, but more importantly it opened up my mind to being more kind, compassionate, and empathetic to everything and everyone. After that experience I became aware of more emotions that I was missing out on, so on that day with the Deer I was more attuned of its unnecessary suffering. Of course, I'm not enlightened, and am still a very flawed person who certainly made more mistakes after that, but I'm simply more mindful now of my impact on this World.

The case for not consuming Animals is generally made with three things in mind aside from the supposed health benefits: Public health, minimizing the suffering of conscious entities, and minimizing one's impact on the planet—as the meat industry is simply one of the most damaging of Ecosystems.<sup>68</sup> The link between Animal agriculture and public health seems to, unfortunately, be very overlooked. Since the Agricultural Revolution essentially every major pandemic and epidemic is in some way from mass domestication of Animals.<sup>69</sup> The onus of this is certainly on the Humans that domesticate them and not the Animals themselves. But now the concern is that the Animals on these mass feed lots are being jam-packed with antibiotics routinely, and if super viruses develop antibiotic resistance, then we may be in a lot of danger.

But even on an individual level to undercook some meats may leave one susceptible to trichinosis, E. coli, or salmonella. The more I learn, the more I realize that the three reasons are inextricably linked. So, it was a no-brainer for me while studying environmental philosophy at the University of Montana to take that necessary step.

When enough individuals decide to make the transition away from (industrial) Animal products, it also creates a ripple effect that enables industry to change. Plant-

based alternatives are springing up, and some companies are developing so-called *cultivated meat*. This is meat from Animal cells grown in the lab that is minimally invasive, but still meat nonetheless. If something like that became the standard, it may only take one generation to realize how dependent our society is on the suffering of conscious Animals for food, clothing, labor, and even entertainment.

I remember telling my brother, Jesse about cultivated meat. He said “That’s just playing god.” That expression of playing god applies to meddling to create something never before seen. But the more I think about it, the more I realize the opposite seems to be true. To completely destroy something is godly. The god of the Abrahamic faiths is genocidal of its own creations, for example. From Babel, to the deluge, the plagues of Moses, to the supposed revelations and judgment. Maybe Humans are godly when it comes to the fate of other species. Personally, I feel transitioning away from Animal products is a place to start for some people regarding ethics and the environment, but not necessarily a place to end. After all, it may have been the case that Hitler was a vegetarian and created some of the first Animal rights laws in the West.<sup>70</sup> So, one could refrain from Animal usage but still be a terrible person.

Humanity has ushered in the era of Anthropogenic climate change, and despite more concern for other species, we’ve reduced the biomass of all Animals by half just since the 1970’s, and have destroyed countless Ecosystems in the process.<sup>71</sup> It’s interesting examining where we draw the line with species. Dogs, Cats, and Horses are friends in the West. While Pigs, Cows, and Chickens are slaughtered as food. Plants, Insects, Rodents, Fungi, and other species are often considered *pest* species that we



don't hesitate to remove from existence. Our interests trump other species in our attempt of becoming actualized in the World.

An international team of researchers note that Animal emotions aren't just simply a reflexive process as was the thought for some time.<sup>72</sup> The Pigs that were studied did exhibit cognitive capabilities and understood their Environment. The researchers developed an algorithm that could analyze Pig vocalizations that correlate with different emotional states like extreme distress with over 91.5% accuracy.

If that technology was further developed to when Pigs or Cows were sent to the slaughter they screamed "Please Stop! Somebody help me, please!" We may feel differently about our impact on others.

In that same debate Jesse and I had about *Playing god* he said, "Plants are conscious too and can suffer."

I actually agreed with him that it's possible that Plants are just as conscious as Animals, and noted that there is increasing research into the *Awareness* that Plants have. Trees for example share resources both above and below Ground and can *sense* when they're being eaten by predators and can alter their chemical profile in ways to dissuade Insects from eating them, or even attract other species to eat them.<sup>73</sup> But even In that case, eating Plants is still more ethical since we're cutting out the middle person, which is the Animal. Also, a lot of the food we grow is used for mass Animal feed lots that we then eat ourselves.

Of course, I don't envision a World completely void of eating meat. We can't expect an extremely poor person in a country straddled with famine who struggles with

getting enough food in general to give up meat, when it's some of the most nutrient-dense products out there. Human suffering is of course still a concern in the equation.

My family and Indigenous peers don't understand my take on meat; even though, to me, it's not a diet as much as it's a philosophy. I also am just as entertained by all the cringy vegans on the internet who tend to virtue signal and think they're inherently more moral than others. I am of course, still with my flaws and mistakes; and something like veganism (which I am not) needs to be understood as a minimization of suffering, not the elimination of suffering. People joke and say

"You know the translation for vegetarian in Blackfeet?"

"What's that?" I say.

"Bad hunter." And I just laugh.

In developing those bonds with other species, I often think, how bad is life for a dairy Cow, forcefully impregnated, and immediately removed from its Calf and spending its entire existence in captivity? Is there something that it's like to be an Insect, or a Plant, or Fungi in terms of subjective experience? And if so, how bad is that experience given Humanities impact on them? These are questions that almost certainly have answers that we may one day know the answers to. I often think what it must be like to have a godly overlord that dictates your life from birth to death, and may be the very source of death and suffering.

Because Humanity has the ability to change so much for everything else during the Anthropocene, I feel we have certain moral responsibilities. Generally, Westerners feel Humans are *moral agents* given things like sentience, sapience, intelligence, or the ability to apply morality as judicial rights. And people feel that non-Human Animals,

children, people with severe cognitive disabilities, and even Ecosystems as *moral patients*. A moral patient is still worthy of moral consideration, mainly because they have the capacity to suffer, but also because they can't communicate their feelings in a way we can understand but are nevertheless worthy of moral status. People don't really think agency is something that wanes, however, if presented with a wide enough power dynamic, Humanity's interests could be trumped by a new master of our own creation.

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Like anyone I was shocked at the rapid rise of ChatGPT and the explosion of artificial intelligence (AI) at the end of 2022. I had serious concerns regarding AI for a while but didn't think it would get here this fast. When prompted by a journalist to describe itself, ChatGPT said

“As an artificial intelligence language model, ChatGPT represents a remarkable achievement in the field of natural language processing. Built on the latest GPT-3.5 architecture, ChatGPT is capable of understanding and responding to human language with an unparalleled level of accuracy and sophistication.<sup>74</sup>”

The creation of ChatGPT and its parent company, OpenAI have essentially created an arms race of intelligence of large language models with Google's Bard trailing close behind. I used to be agnostic about so-called narrow AI; that is, intelligent algorithms that can perform a very specific task like ChatGPT's ability to write at superHuman levels extremely fast. But I had serious reservations about Artificial

General Intelligence (AGI). As the name suggests, AGI is capable of high performance on almost any task from information processing, to scientific research, and even in a military context. But even in its infancy, narrow AI is at the very least, concerning. It's almost as if the genie is poking its head out of the lamp, and we as a species may very well spend the rest of our existence desperately trying to shove it back in. The philosopher John Danaher supposes that at the very least AI could transition Humans from being moral agents to moral patients, and all of our daily decisions and tasks could be made by a digital oracle.<sup>75</sup> We could wake up in the morning to all our emails automatically responded to, get in our self-driving car to a job that is also mostly automated, and consume throughout the day personalized advertisements that can predict with accuracy what we'll consume next and so on.

Many Environmental ethicists note that much like non-Human Animals, Humans haven't done a great job at respecting other species or Ecosystems.<sup>76</sup> Robots for example, are just another kind of synthetic Animal, regardless of how they emerge in the World—and therefore, we should treat them with respect and even grant them rights.<sup>77</sup> As someone who argues for an Environmental ethic that spans everything including Water and Mountains, I don't totally disagree with that. However, the difficult question I'm concerned with is the opposite; how do we make super intelligent machines respect our species? This is known as *the alignment problem* and the fear of AI going rogue. This problem is analogous to Humans aligning themselves to the interests of Insects. There are times when we may avoid stepping on Insects while on a hike for example, but we also don't hesitate to deploy insecticides on species that are considered *pests* in our pursuit of agriculture, for example. How can we engineer a

superintelligence to have ethical standards for us who may feel we are a *pest* given our neglect for our own planet evidenced by the Anthropocene?

There are also programming concerns. Imagine if we programmed an AI algorithm to perform the noble task of ending cancer in Humans for example. The easiest ways to eradicate cancer in Humans is to kill all the Humans. It's comparable to when the Agricultural Revolution took over the World, the main objective was to grow a surplus of food. Well the way we've been doing It is by killing all other species that also eat the crops.

The biggest fear, however, is known as *The Singularity*. It's possible that the spectrum of intelligence extends so much that AI could merge and develop itself to a point that is completely unfathomable to our feeble minds;<sup>78</sup> and that really is kind of godly, surpassing AGI and into Artificial Super Intelligence (ASI). AI was essentially born yesterday and is already cause for panic, who knows what it will look like in 20 years, 50 years, or 1,000 years from now. The possibilities are almost endless, especially if AI could develop the ability to improve upon itself. For so long people felt that AI was merely science fiction, or at the very least a far-off possibility, but it's here whether we like it or not.

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But alas, those are the worst-case scenarios regarding AI. If anything, my existential dread makes me feel even more empathetic and connected to other species who's fears of Humanity are certainly justified. To assume AI would make it to ASI and

on to the singularity is a slippery slope. The AI apocalypse could just be a repackaged secular version of biblical apocalypse anyway. AI also has the potential to reshape society in better ways. It could very well develop vaccines previously undiscovered, and maybe with a one-time treatment cure any mental illness it is presented with simply by being far more intelligent than any team of doctors. It could solve our energy problems and completely end Anthropogenic climate change (hopefully not by killing Humanity), and it could do all of those things very accurately and quickly.

If actual robots become integrated into society, they may in fact, be the most moral beings on Earth. Unlike Humans, their existence isn't dependent upon other living entities like Plants for their own survival, and may be without the need of an economy based on infinite growth with finite resources. This may necessitate something like a Universal Basic Income or vast social welfare programs giving Humans more time for family, pursuing passions, and creating art etc.

I'll admit though, that even the best-case scenarios are still concerning. We may just forever be passengers in society's vehicle that we initially built to drive. The reason I was agnostic about narrow AI was because I felt they could replace dangerous and meaningless labor jobs—but if AI systems become sentient (assuming they're not already) and they're confined to doing our hard labor, then we've just undone all the progress we've made in ending slavery. But secondly, it seems the opposite of labor is true. That AI has the potential to displace all the work that gives Humans meaning. AI models are already outperforming Humans at things like AP exams, Bar exams, and English composition and are only going to get better.<sup>79</sup> Companies are already not hiring any new freelance writers or journalists as they can outsource those tasks for

free. Programmers and coders are probably next. Why would a company pay a Human to perform a task when a machine could do it for free, faster, and better? This may only leave labor and trade jobs for Humans, as even the arts are no exception.

In April, 2023 Drake released a new song featuring The Weekend called *Heart on my Sleeve*.<sup>80</sup> The song seems to be about the complexities of modern dating and had millions of listens very quickly—but there's just one major problem; Drake and The Weekend didn't release the song, it was completely generated by AI and nearly indiscernible from their actual work. On one hand, there are legal issues regarding copyright and intellectual property of music for example, but if we could generate thousands of songs instantly that sound uncannily like an artist, what reason would the artist need to continue working? These issues would come to head in mid 2023 when the main television and movie writers and actors' unions went on strike in the U.S. to partially demand their jobs not be replaced by AI.<sup>81</sup> Deep fake technology while rudimentary now, may soon be a serious problem when World leaders may be indistinguishable from their digital counterpart.

These technologies could develop faster than anticipated and lead to what's called an *Intelligence Explosion*.<sup>82</sup> We may not be far off from when a Nobel Prize winning discovery or a PhD dissertation could be made every .0003 seconds purely with technology. AI generated research may be so precise that there is no need for null hypotheses leaving Humans very little reason to work in the same field as something that could out-perform us in any way possible. This is of course, not inherently bad, but then we'd have to rethink what role Humans have in earning academic degrees, conducting research; or even making art like music, movies, image-based art, or writing

novels. My only hope now is that it doesn't happen in my lifetime. One person who saw the writing on the wall and came up with their own solution was Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. Isolated in his cabin, he devised a plan to destroy the machine before it was born. Clearly, killing Humans isn't the ideal way to address the looming issue of proliferating AI. At the very least lay-people like myself can simply talk rationally about how we soon may no longer be the apex species in terms of intelligence and making decisions that affect the World.

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Personally, I don't know how I'd find meaning in a World where anything that gives me meaning could be outsourced to a superintelligence. Instead hopefully I can leave my fears behind with even more countless hours of trying to live in the moment. Maybe I can spend more time Mountain-biking, or generate thousands of songs from my favorite artists (certainly not Drake or The Weekend). I can spend more time at my family's ranch, high up in the Big Belt Mountains further connected to Nature. I can still get more college degrees so I can finally feel qualified to share ideas like this, no matter how futile it may seem. At the very least I can share my concerns while there's still time. My biggest hope is that in the future people can look back at the worries people like me had surrounding the emergence of AI and only laugh at how wrong we were. Like anyone, I am deeply fascinated into the potential that AI has—but also terrified.



# Mind Field

During my youth I walked out the back door of my family home. It was a bright midsummer day when I did a double take peering into the deep Grass which was probably still as tall as me back then at about eleven years young. I saw something on the prowl moving through the maze of vegetation that looked as if it had the coloring of a Mountain Lion. I distinctly remember thinking, *I need to get to higher ground to see what that is*. I began climbing the barn... Wait... *I'm in a dream right now*, I realized. All of a sudden, I got very excited and continued to climb, feeling the strain of my arms lifting my body weight up the barn and feeling the actual sensation of the rustic barn wood beneath my hands despite still being in the dream. I got too excited though and quickly woke up before I could see the Animal in question.

This was my first experience with the phenomenon known as lucid dreaming. By definition, lucid dreaming is the ability to simply recognize you're in a dream. But colloquially, it is the ability to actually take control of your dreams without limitations. For decades lucid dreaming was thought to be complete pseudoscience until it was studied scientifically in a lab for the first time in 1975.<sup>83</sup> Imagine walking on top of Water, running at the speed of light far into space, or visiting historical figures. All of that is possible by hacking your own dreams to achieve lucidity.

Although I loved the experience I didn't yet know how it happened. Back then, the internet wasn't what it is today, certainly not on the Blackfeet Reservation, and definitely not in our household. Due to my age and ignorance, I didn't know how to

research such a topic. Googling *controlling your dreams* on dial-up internet in 2002 might've brought you to some obscure self-help blog which had nothing to do with the dreamscape. Meanwhile, I probably was only playing Pinball or Minesweeper at that time. I asked friends but never really got anything other than hearing about some random dream they had the night before.

Dreams are considered sacred to my people, the Blackfeet. They are an ecosystem of the ether, an excavator to the unconscious; but there are always just little nuggets about them in the cultural tradition here and there, never anything concrete. The wisdom of the tribe is very much like a dream; you only get little pieces every so often like a puzzle, but they seem to slip away if you're not paying sufficient attention.

I remember hearing a very respected elder once say, "One reason the Blackfeet were such good warriors was because we could control our dreams." *Hmm, is that lucid dreaming?* I thought. Maybe there were using dreams to simulate battle tactics, or even to train in their sleep. One thing about that statement was true though, we Blackfeet were of the fiercest tribes on the plains historically—but even with a strict militant code, it wasn't uncommon or frowned upon for a warrior to return back to camp on the way to battle because the night before they had a "bad dream".<sup>84</sup> Was the person foreseeing their future demise or was their mind simply making rational calculations based on a very real coming threat? Of course, as a student of science now, my thought is of the latter, but am open to other interpretations.

Though the Blackfeet were a powerhouse of the plains for so long, their power was a symbiotic one that formed with the Bison—or (*Bison bison bison*) for those other scientific minded readers. Bison were such close relatives, they were at the cornerstone

of the tribe and used for everything from food, shelter, tools, ceremony, and clothing. Once the U.S. government nearly eradicated the majestic species, the Blackfeet culture became a shell of its former self, succumbing to starvation.<sup>85</sup> One day in the late nineteenth century a group of Blackfeet got word of a small herd nearby that were corralled, and could easily be harvested—but there was one warrior, Many Tail Feathers whose dream the prior night instructed him to simply let the Bison go.<sup>86</sup> Much to the dismay of his fellow warriors who were literally facing starvation, the Bison were released. Today Bison have rebounded, as did Blackfeet culture; but it's quite possible had it not been for that one dream, the entire species might have gone completely extinct, as there were so few back then. Again though, I wrestle with thinking dreams are anything mystical but simply manifestations of our waking life, but they nevertheless have an evolutionary purpose and can be extremely valuable. Can taking control of those dreams make them even more useful I wonder?

**R**esearch into dreams themselves is fascinating. The Nobel prize discovery of the periodic table, or the invention of the sewing machine, even famous songs like *Let it Be* and *Yesterday* by the Beatles were discovered in dreams.<sup>87</sup> But dreams are old news, how much cooler is it to control those dreams? It is possible to significantly boost creativity using dreams, or to make breakthrough discoveries since you're tapping deep into the subconscious mind and there aren't really limitations in dreams. After that initial experience with the supposed Mountain Lion, I would become lucid here and there while dreaming but still struggled with initiating the experience intentionally. I figured we

sleep around a third of our entire life, so I might as well make it interesting, plus I was always fascinated by novel psychological experiences.

Eventually the internet became more of what it is today, and there were decent resources of people sharing their experiences, but with few instructions on what actually worked. Eventually I came across a book titled *A Field Guide to Lucid Dreaming: Mastering the Art of Oneironautics* that gave me clear instructions to induce lucidity. Much like an astronaut is one who explores the cosmos, an oneironaut is one who explores their dreams.

As it turns out there are three overall methods to achieve awareness in the dream state: The first is the MILD method, or the Mnemonic Induction of Lucid Dreams. As you go to bed each night at or close to the same time, you make a strong and deliberate intention that upon waking up during the night saying something like, *the next time I'm dreaming, I will recognize that I'm dreaming and take control of that dream*. The idea is that you're trying to hack your Rapid Eye Movement (REM) cycles and treating your sleep cycles like a train and hopping onboard during the final stop to dreamland. REM sleep now seems to be common knowledge, and is when dreams are most vivid, but our REM cycles get progressively longer as we sleep, as do our dreams within them.<sup>88</sup> So, upon waking after a vivid dream but before you need to get up for the day, you state your intention, and try to go back into the dream and boom, lucid... Although, not really. The MILD method isn't as effective as some of the other methods.

A more reliable method that one can do in addition with some of the MILD techniques is called the DILD method or Dream Induced Lucid Dream: Keep a dream journal and be disciplined so as to not forget your dreams. This alone is vital, as we

tend to forget our dreams very easily upon waking up. Write down all the details you remember in every dream you have with the date and time, much like a regular journal, no detail is too trivial or embarrassing. I would suggest not using a phone, due to it being a light source and may signal to your brain that it is day time when it is in fact not. Treat those notes as data, and you can start to recognize patterns. For me around that time in 2014 I always dreamt of football for some reason. Sure, I played football, but wasn't the least bit passionate about it. I wasn't a star player, and since graduating high school in 2009 didn't miss it at all. But for whatever reason, I always dreamt about football, so if I was all the sudden back on the gridiron, I was certainly dreaming. Just like the MILD method set a strong intention to lucid dream before going to bed as intentions can be powerful. Again, the aim is to induce this in the later REM stages when dreams are longer and more vivid.

In addition to the journal and strong intentions, during your waking life, really question whether you're in a dream or not. This may sound ridiculous, however, what we do in our waking life, we tend to do in the dream life. Much like in the epic movie *Inception*, having a totem helps with this technique within the DILD method. It could be every time you put your phone in your pocket is when you ask, *Am I dreaming right now?* By doing this enough, you may put your phone in your pocket one day and ask that simple question, but sure enough you realize you are dreaming. You may notice your hands look abnormal, or clocks never work quite right, or if you dare, take a look in the mirror to find a distorted face; these are common reports of lucid dreamers.

I used the DILD method for months until one night when I was at a nightclub and went to use the bathroom. The urinals were on a huge platform about four feet off the

Ground, *okay, that's a little weird*, I thought. *Oh wait, is it weird because I could be dreaming? I am dreaming, holy shit*, I realized. At that point I jumped off the platform and flew around the room. Much like my first lucid dream I could feel the actual physical sensations of flight. I could feel the wind breezing past my face as I cut through the Air flying back and forth in the room and loving every second of it. I felt tingling in my stomach as I was weightless zipping around the room. It was the kind of feeling you get riding a rollercoaster, but this ride was in my own mind and yet, produced the same exact feelings. How fascinating. I remember thinking, *I'm going to go out the door and see what else I could do*, but much to my surprise, I realized what many lucid dreamers discover. I tried to walk out the door, but it only led me to a void of darkness and soon woke up. Often people report that you can't control the dream itself, but only yourself within the dream.

The experience was short-lived because if you get too excited, you simply wake up. This seems to happen frequently because the first two things people try to do are to fly or have dream sex, both of which are very exciting. It just so happens that lucid dream sex feels far better than the real thing and is a sensory overload, which isn't to say that sex in the waking life is all about physical sensation, but is just simply the case for many oneironauts until you train yourself to not get too stimulated.

**E**xcited about my new discovery, I wanted to dig further into my subconscious mind, but became aware that there was an imbalance between the amount of effort I put into trying to lucid dream, and the brief moments I was able to, so I didn't do it much after that. It also doesn't seem to be a good practice of mental health to literally question

at all times if you're awake or not—but regardless I did feel compelled to spread the message about this fascinating discovery. I mean, who wouldn't want to know what it feels like to fly like a superhero or to jump as high as possible and not get hurt upon falling back to Earth? I feel like I told just about every one of these experiences, but only one person was truly interested in giving it a try, and that was my cousin Nick. Nick who taught high school English, Nick who owns the only cannabis dispensary on the Blackfeet Reservation, Nick who did Magic Mushrooms with me in the Mountains, and Nick, who like me at the time was open to esoteric experiences like lucid dreaming. I gave him my copy of *A Field Guide to Lucid Dreaming*.

It may have been over a year later when we saw each other again, as Nick was living in East Glacier, while I lived in Missoula. I may have even forgot about the book altogether, until he said, "Hey it worked." "What are you talking about?" I responded. "The lucid dreaming." "Oh yeah, that's right, tell me all about it." I said. Nick told me he trained for months, following the techniques until one night he was walking around a psychedelic Forest full of unusual colors and lit by the Moon until he realized, *wait, I'm dreaming right now*. He said he sat in front of a beautiful Tree that was pulsating like a heart and had veins running up and down its being. He ran the tips of his fingers up and down it and could feel the actual bark under his fingertips, literally no different than a "real" Tree. He could smell the wood and foliage. But also, exactly like me, he walked inside his house, still in the dream, to convince his parents to join him on this amazing adventure. Much to his surprise though, his parents were like non-playable characters in a video game with boring dialogue, and were kind of just there and couldn't be controlled by Nick.

Though I never asked Nick which method he used, there is an even more bizarre method, aptly named the WILD method. Wake Induced Lucid Dreams may in fact just be Westerners co-opting something else entirely that has been known by Eastern yogi's possibly for millennia—and that is called yoga nidra. I'm not certain if they are the same thing but the instructions to achieve them seem identical. While I'm not qualified to speak on yoga nidra, the process of the WILD method goes as such: Lay completely still on your back at night and fight any urge to move. Focus your mind on one thing and one thing only while not letting your mind fall asleep. Your mind will stray eventually, but simply bring your awareness back to the initial object of thought. As you relax, your mind may stray much less frequently. The idea is to trick your body into falling asleep, while keeping your mind awake. What happens next can actually be fairly uncomfortable. Eventually you may notice sensations or visual artifacts in your mind's eye. Most people report vibrations that can get pretty intense, but for me, it always involves the feeling of spinning rapidly. Too many drunken nights getting actually wild in my early twenties before giving up alcohol usually puts a stop to the WILD method for me, so I can't recall going beyond that. It's called "wake induced" for a reason, because you're in a kind of twilight state, not really asleep but not really awake either. People have used yoga nidra (assuming it's the same things as the WILD method) to "study" something both in waking and sleeping states to learn much faster. Maybe that's what the utility of lucid dreaming is, to better oneself in the dream state to optimize yourself in the waking state.



**A**t the same time that I was discovering lucid dreaming, I had experienced another dream-like phenomenon. If lucid dreaming is a beautiful, loving child that provides guidance and creativity, then sleep paralysis is its evil, twisted twin. Imagine waking up in the middle of the night, opening your eyes, but being completely unable to move or speak, and being burdened with the utmost sheer terror and dreadful feeling you've ever felt. In addition, breathing gets increasingly more difficult, and weirdly there is often some kind of silhouette-figure that is inhabiting the room with you trying to smother you. No matter how much you try to just simply move or even scream, you cannot. Unlike lucid dreaming, I was far too scared to tell anyone about my sleep paralysis. But it was often initiated similarly. I would be running away from a monster knowing I was sleeping and trying to force myself awake, but as soon as I opened my eyes to see the actual room I was in, I could still often see the ghoul trying to get me.

In England sleep paralysis is also called Old Hag Syndrome and is one of several kinds of hypnagogic hallucinations that happen during the night. The ghoul was often described historically as a woman in black, which probably points to deeper sexist sentiments, and her name is Mare. Mare always comes for you in the dead of night, which is actually the etymology of the word "nightmare."<sup>89</sup> Unlike the beautiful songs discovered in dreams of the Beatles, the very first heavy metal song by Black Sabbath, also called *Black Sabbath*, was inspired by sleep paralysis:

What is this that stands before me?

Figure in black which points at me.

Turn 'round quick and start to run

Find out I'm the chosen one

Oh, no!

Oh no is right, as no matter how many times this has happened to me, I'm never rational to remember what's going on. I've gotten to the point of trying my absolute hardest to scream "HELP, HELP", but it's always just mumbles. Once when I was a senior in high school I was trying my absolute hardest to force myself awake from a monster trying to tear into my abdomen while I was paralyzed. I figured I could fight it off if I could just wake up and move. I was trying to scream and move, but was just groaning loudly and the only thing I was able to move was my hands in a circular motion. Eventually my dad could hear me all the way from upstairs and came out of his room to holler and wake me up from outside my room, which worked. It's probably a good thing he didn't come in the room. Because, if he saw me groaning and moving my hands in circles, he might've gotten jolted back to his Catholic upbringing thinking I was possessed or something.

Another time I was (literally) sleeping with a doctor when I woke her and her very neurotic Dog up mumbling, "help, help!". Her dog, Xena jumped on me and pounced on my chest until I awoke, which is far more than my own Dog ever does, and just watches me until I come out of it eventually. "Oh, thank you, Xena!" I said, "sounds like you were having a bad dream?" my friend said. "No, it was even worse, it was sleep paralysis." I was a little surprised that despite her being in the medical field, she had never heard of it. Fortunately, she had never experienced it.

If sleep paralysis already sounds terrifying, and trust me it is, it is all the more terrifying knowing that it can actually kill you. Sleep paralysis often happens when the subject is sleep deprived and goes directly into REM sleep when finally being able to

sleep, but “wakes up” at the wrong interval.<sup>90</sup> REM sleep paralyzes us so we don’t act out our dreams, but often the paralysis is so stress-inducing the heart rate dramatically increases, but the breathing pattern remains slow, which is why there is often a feeling of not being able to breathe.<sup>91</sup> Death from sleep paralysis is psychosomatic and can be compounded with strong cultural beliefs, which goes to show how powerful the mind is. In the late 1970s and early 80s after the CIA lost the secret war with Laos, a lot of Hmong refugees immigrated to the United States.<sup>92</sup> However, soon after a lot of them were found to have died in their sleep, and yet, they were otherwise healthy and young.<sup>93</sup> This was because by being displaced they were no longer able to perform their traditional ways which looked to thwart sleep paralysis and were dying as a result of literally being scared to death.<sup>94</sup>

Many people have experienced this phenomenon at some point, and it almost entirely explains things like demonic possessions or alien abductions. Knowing what it’s like makes me actually empathize with religious zealots of yesteryear who were scientifically ignorant but experiencing very real terror. I now realize the reason I experience sleep paralysis so much was because I was probably chronically sleep deprived. Ever since I could remember I had the hardest time falling asleep but didn’t quite know why.

**M**ore discoveries are bound to happen with lucid dreams, and dreams in general. Sleep is so essential, and yet it doesn’t make sense from an evolutionary perspective. It seems like evolution would’ve found lying around for hours, not foraging, not finding partners, and being vulnerable to predators and enemies to be very maladaptive, and yet here we are, sleepers of the night.

It was actually in a dream how I remembered why I couldn't ever seem to ever fall asleep growing up. It was around that same time I was practicing lucid dreaming, I got very good at remembering my dreams in general from all of my journaling. I woke up from a dream one morning with tears in my eyes, but it wasn't just a dream it was a memory from deep in the recesses of my mind. The reason I was always sleep deprived is because my first babysitter used to do abusive things to me, and I had forgotten about it either because I was too young or it was too traumatic and I filed it away somewhere in my subconscious. My brother who was also babysat by the same person at the same time corroborated part of the story for me years later since he was a little older, and probably remembered more. He said I would be falling asleep bobbing my head, but being too guarded to let myself rest. I would stare at my babysitter, refusing to break eye contact and feeling like to stay awake was to protect myself from them. I may never know the full extent of what exactly happened, but my intuitions of that person were always bad, as I still know them. It was nevertheless a dream how I put those pieces together, just like my Blackfeet ancestors always told how they could be used and why they are sacred.

Dreams and lucid dreams elucidate and illuminate part of the elusive subconscious mind. Humans dream far more than we realize, but of course don't remember upon waking up. Dreams can be hacked to boost creativity, to explore one's subconscious to help make discoveries or to remember something from your past. But one needs to tread lightly in the dream state, as it may bring about something else entirely. Dreams tell us something about consciousness overall. Our sense of self, though just a powerful illusion, still gets carried over into the dream state. Regardless,

the only thing guaranteed in this Universe is that we are conscious and our conscious state can experience moments of bliss and harmony, to states of terror and suffering. Our brain doesn't discriminate between these extremes whether we're awake or asleep. I'd love to have one continuous dream each night and to build a World that doesn't have the ills of the waking World and can use it to heal, or to be used to save other endangered species—but I hope as I awake each morning it is without a demon trying to smother me back into reality.

## Death of Belonging

I woke up feeling very cold. I exhaled to see my breath written in the wind and thought *someone should restart the Fire*. I then realized that that “someone” was me. It was late November, 2016 in North Dakota on a little reservation called Standing Rock. I realized I was too accustomed to modern comforts, so something as simple as restarting the Fire doesn’t go unnoticed by the group I was becoming close with. I went there with some friends, mostly veterans who drove from the University of Montana along with thousands of people from all around the World to save part of the Missouri River from the Dakota Access Pipeline.

I remember falling asleep at the main camp one night feeling completely full, not on food, but on happiness. I laid my head down in the tipi listening to an ad hoc PA system many voices and languages I had never heard sing sacred songs all into the night. Just as I was slipping into sleep, I heard a song I did recognize. “Let it be, let it be, whisper words of wisdom, let it be.” *That’s definitely a non-native who just had to sing*, I thought as I drifted off into dreamland to wake up cold again.

This was my second venture to Standing Rock, as the fight began earlier that year and had gone into the winter. I really can’t explain the overwhelming sense of community I was feeling, but I do know that it was unlike anything I feel in my daily life. One friend would constantly say with a big smile on her face, “Isn’t this amazing?” talking about nothing more than the camp itself and the bonds we were building and just how happy and selfless everyone was. I had friends who left their jobs and daily lives behind to fully dedicate themselves to being Water protectors for the entire duration; the

deep sense of community and feeling needed by a society is enough to fight for, let alone protecting the Missouri River.

I went there with basic First Aid and street medic training to do my part to treat those in need, but left with a completely new outlook on life. From my perspective, being in the camp represented two things: for my future it instilled in me a duty for Environmental activism, and from a historical perspective it reinvigorated a sense of belonging which is lost in time for most people.

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Throughout Humanity's evolution things were largely the same. You'd be born into a relatively small group like the one in Standing Rock, and your survival was based on your contributions to that group. Every single member of the group was a necessary component to the general wellbeing no matter how harsh the conditions were. As such, you'd develop extremely deep and lasting emotional bonds to everyone. Greed, loneliness, and a meaningless job were largely unheard of as they didn't serve the greater good<sup>95</sup>. The behavior of each member was very prosocial, selfless, and reciprocal to all things, and one never really had time to ever feel alone or unneeded.<sup>96</sup>

Standing Rock, at least to me, was beginning to look a lot like the history of colonialism. On one side of an imaginary line in the U.S. for example, you had an industrializing society with technology and promises of the future, and on the other side were so-called "Merciless Indian Savages".<sup>97</sup> And yet, all throughout history there was an interesting phenomenon that was well documented which found that there were

many examples of people leaving modern society behind to join a tribal society, and yet there were almost no examples of the opposite. There were really no tribal people who would leave their tribe to go join modernity.<sup>98</sup> You would think people would be allured by modern technology and surplus, but actually having a strong connection to others is what modern people long for.

There are several reasons to explain this phenomenon. Some of the most prominent reasons are that tribal societies are extremely democratic and lacking in social classes. Social classes really only emerge when societies become sedentary, as they can then accumulate wealth<sup>99</sup>. Secondly, there was an incredible amount of freedom, autonomy, and leisure time for everyone regardless of age, gender, sexuality etc. A young woman from the early U.S. colonies named Mary Jemison was adopted by two Seneca women in 1758.<sup>100</sup> She lived three different lives; one of colonial America, one being with the Seneca tribe, and later in life she experienced early industrial America.<sup>101</sup> Of all three, she loved the freedom and happiness she experienced with the Seneca the most, and when encouraged on many occasions to leave, she decided to stay with her adopted tribe.<sup>102</sup> Thirdly, individuals were almost never alone, at least not for long, which is rare in today's society.

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The building of the Dakota Access Pipeline to me marked forcing a modern view of Nature onto Indigenous peoples. An Indigenous Environmental ethic often finds Water to be “more-than-human-persons” and a relative of the people, where industrial



societies find Water to mostly be property.<sup>103</sup> History has observed in real-time what shifts like this look like. The Nayak people of south India for example, were very much a hunter-gatherer society since time immemorial.<sup>104</sup> Eventually, they made a shift into basic agriculture, and almost immediately they began to lose their connection to some Plants and Animals in their ecosystem, and quickly began to view them as subservient to Humans.<sup>105</sup> Agriculture almost always creates a division of labor, which facilitates social classes and castigates Nature in the process.<sup>106</sup>

Of course, agriculture isn't inherently bad, and some Indigenous tribes have adopted semi-agrarian lifestyles without losing their ethic,<sup>107</sup> but without the Agricultural Revolution, we couldn't have made an even more extreme shift into the juggernaut that is the Industrial Revolution and capitalism which further drives people apart.

To me it had seemed that all of this history was culminating into one oil pipeline where the sanctity of Water was seen as less than that of oil and profit margins, and basically where part of the fate of the Missouri itself was subject to that of industry. Industry is always seen as progress in the modern World—but there is possibly no larger gap in lifestyle than between our Indigenous tribal past and our modern industrialized society. One of the least talked about parts of capitalist nations is just how lonely they are.

At almost the same exact rate that a country industrializes, the rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide tend to follow, as modern people no longer belong to a tight-knit group and they don't make meaningful impacts to their society.<sup>108</sup> For the first time in our species' existence, we could be in a city of millions of people, and yet, feel completely alone. The loneliness epidemic not only impacts us mentally and socially but

physically as well. Researchers have found that loneliness can be just as bad as chronic cigarette smoking or obesity.<sup>109</sup> Interestingly, the word “loneliness” didn’t exist in the English language until after the Industrial Revolution.<sup>110</sup>

Capitalism is often touted as the best system Humanity has, but why do so many of its people feel completely alienated and alone? If depression is a consequence of living in the past and anxiety is living in the future as I feel, tribal lifestyle is overwhelming communal, egalitarian, and very much living in the present simply because each member had to fulfill their duties to the group on a daily basis. That doesn’t mean Indigenous societies were perfect, or tribes didn’t plan for the future or have regrets from the past, but individuals were able to put their personal problems aside for the greater-good of their society. Most paradoxically, when Western people from modernized countries find themselves in extreme circumstances such as war and disasters, their happiness and overall sense of wellbeing and safety actually increase as it supplements a sense of belonging and duty, very much like a tribe.<sup>111</sup>

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Standing Rock gave me the opposite perspective I had grown accustomed to. I saw many of the weapons and tactics I used in the military being used on peaceful civilians. I always understood why people joined the military, but it never made sense to me why people stayed in the military given the stress and everyday intensity. I then realized that being Indigenous, I had a tribe to come home to. For others the military was their tribe and may have never really felt such comradery prior to their enlistment.

While I was stationed in North Carolina, one common phenomenon each year were hurricanes. One in particular stands out because I was on duty during its entirety. I remember it was predicted to be a big one, and in the days leading up to it those of us on duty blocked all the floor-level doors with sand bags, we upturned all tables and outside furniture, and loaded up on Water and provisions. Since I was on duty, a group of Marines and I of varying ranks had to stay in our battalion office for about a week, which is unheard of otherwise.

The first day or so was very much like every other day in the military; very hierarchical and having clear authority. After a couple days things began to shift a bit. People became slightly more concerned with group welfare. "Here, have some of my food", people would say, willingly giving their rations away. Or they would say, "I haven't seen you sleep in a while, try to get some sleep." Usually the military seems to keep you as sleep deprived as possible.

It was a hurricane of all things that made me feel more connected to people I would otherwise try to avoid. If it had gone on longer, we may have become a full-on tribe with our own culture and customs. Suddenly the words of a combat veteran once told me made clear sense. He said, "Isn't it funny how the Marine Corps will send us to some of the worst places in the World, and yet we end up loving it?" I began to wonder if such experiences of disparate people could come together in times of need, could it happen on a larger scale?

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Joining the military in 2009 I realized that many of the Marines senior to me had joined either directly or indirectly because of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, and the subsequent wars. Much like Standing Rock was an awakening moment for me, September 11<sup>th</sup> was an awakening moment for them. We all know the story of that fateful day in 2001: The World Trade Center was attacked, the U.S. government instantly made radical changes to policies spanning nearly every issue, and the U.S. military geared up to invade the Middle East. But there was a lot more in the story happening at ground zero with all of the victims and volunteers who put their lives in danger to help their fellow Humans. It wasn't the government, but first responders, and every-day citizens whose stories are worth remembering.

Volunteers offered their boats, cars, shelter, Food and Water to rescue those in need.<sup>112</sup> In the next few days people even began donating blood and voluntarily searching for missing Persons;<sup>113</sup> and there were lines out of the military recruiting offices probably not seen since Pearl Harbor. Even more surprising there was roughly a 20% drop in New York City's suicide rate and a 40% drop in the murder rate for months after the attacks, and even a drop in prescribing antianxiety and antidepressant medications throughout the city.<sup>114</sup>

To the rest of the World, the U.S. is known for being plagued by mass shootings seemingly every week, but New York, a city of millions, didn't see a mass shooting for the next two years after the attacks.<sup>115</sup> Disasters effectively resurrect a part of the Human spirit lost to history. Regardless of socioeconomic status, political leaning, gender, ethnicity etc. people set aside their differences and answer the call to action.

Disasters, of all things, make people feel connected and needed by their society, and that their contributions have a lasting impact on the lives of others.

Unfortunately, the bonds people make in the short term in a modern society following tragedy don't last long. But September 11th wasn't the first or last time the city sprawl of New York experienced such bonds. Two years later in 2003 there was a city-wide electricity blackout.<sup>116</sup> Very quickly people set aside their mundane daily lives and "stepped up their sense of neighborliness."<sup>117</sup> A kind of tribal lifestyle naturally set in and the people began sharing in festivities and resources, and began talking with each other more intimately. The same thing happened in 1965 with the same exact result; individuals quickly realized how mundane and individualized their daily lives are, so a disruption to their daily lives naturally made them more communal.<sup>118</sup>

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Standing Rock, like September 11<sup>th</sup>, brought strangers together united under a common cause to prevent Ecological disaster. Unfortunately, there were still oil leaks into the Missouri River since the inevitable construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline.<sup>119</sup> It also may not have been the most violent battle, fortunately, but a battle for the future nonetheless. Battles and war, like disasters, also produce those same feelings of belonging and duty. One thing that is increasingly difficult for veterans, or even civilians who were caught in a warzone to talk about is that there is often something that they actually miss about the war. It suddenly occurred to me that what gives U.S. veterans in particular PTSD isn't necessarily trauma they experienced from

the war *per se*, but rather coming home to a lonely country after their initial trauma. I saw the same behavior from the Water protectors from Standing Rock who quickly got depressed after the camp was evacuated.

When I talk to my combat veteran friends about the war, they often remark “I wasn’t there for Bush, Obama, or any corporation, I was there for the person to my left and to my right”. That sentence makes more sense to me with each passing year and especially in moments of loneliness. It makes me wonder that if we built a society that we feel is the best, then why is it death and destruction of all things that makes us feel good and connected to each other?

Especially since my time at Standing Rock I’ve spent my academic career arguing that there are things truly worth preserving from Indigenous cultures that extend far into the past; and I feel almost all of my Indigenous peers would agree with that. Of course, most Indigenous societies today are also modernized and can be found driving cars, and living in houses, so even for someone like me, I also get a boost in bliss when I return to my roots like at Standing Rock or even in times during my military service.

But there are also things Indigenous societies did historically that are also worth leaving in the past. These are the sensitive topics that modern Indigenous people would probably rather not talk about, but also need to be acknowledged. As communal and happy as tribal lifestyle was historically, it was certainly not perfect, and even brutal at times. Granted, it wasn’t really any more violent than colonial societies at the time but warfare was a constant with neighboring tribes. Brutality wasn’t just found in battle; my own tribe for example, used to cut women’s noses off for committing adultery.<sup>120</sup> There were also varying degrees of practicing slavery by tribes in the U.S. Slavery, though

introduced by colonialism, was adopted by many different tribes.<sup>121</sup> And all over the World there are many tribes who had dangerous, painful, degrading, or even sexual rites of passages often performed by children.<sup>122</sup> These are the reasons why it is extremely important not to romanticize tribal societies but instead learn from their best practices.

At the same time, we can also admit to the fact that modern society in the twenty-first century has alleviated many of the unnecessary suffering of the past. Modern medicine and science have dramatically saved billions of lives (of Humans), increased the lifespan for most of the developed World, greatly reduced infant mortality, and has made tremendous discoveries across the board. The World is also the most peaceful it has ever been and dying in war is actually very rare.<sup>123</sup> We've come a long way from hunting and gathering as the only means of survival, most of us now have a plethora of options on what kind of lifestyle we'd like to live and what kind of hobbies or jobs we'd like to do.

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The way I see it is that we have two extremes on a continuum: On one side is how all of Humanity evolved, which is why we feel so at-home and needed by a tribe-like group. At the same time, there were harsh penalties if you didn't adhere to the practices set before you by the group, and there was an inherent outgroup bias. The other side is on the cutting edge of innovation, industry, and discovery where most of the focus is on the individual; but subsequently the people become so lonely ailments

like depression, anxiety, addiction, and even suicide is almost inevitable. This in no way means these are the only two ways to organize a society, but simply two extremes. Maybe we can take the best aspects of each extreme into the future. Maybe we can have a functioning society that isn't so depressed and starved for an emotional connection, but we can do it without fully reverting back to a tribal lifestyle without the basics of modern comfort and technology. I have no idea on how to do that, but I know I can't do it alone. In the meantime, it helps to supplement belonging to a group with things like support groups, gyms, or a weekly activity with friends. Maybe the climate crisis will get so bad that in order for us to survive, we'll have no choice but to come together to create lasting change.

So, maybe that's what something like Standing Rock really meant all along. It wasn't just a call for ending extraction practices, or a demand for better alternatives to energy and to save the Missouri River, maybe it was a desperate call for wanting to feel part of something bigger than ourselves without the need for war or disaster. Maybe it was a call to not feel alone.



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