

Keepers of the Earth
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Scattered and Wild

As a child of ten, I once sat on a hillside on the reservation with my father and his mother as they looked down into the town in the valley floor. It was blackcap, berry season and the sun was very warm, but there in the high country, a cool breeze moved through the overshading pines. Bluebirds and canaries darted and chirped in nearby bushes while a meadowlark sang for rain from the hillside above. Sage and wild roses sent their messages out to the humming bees and pale yellow butterflies.

Down in the valley the heat waves danced, and dry dust rose in clouds from the dirt roads near the town. Shafts of searing glitter reflected off hundreds of windows, while smoke and grayish haze hung over the town itself. The angry sounds of cars honking in a slow crawl along the shimmering black highway and the grind of large machinery from the sawmill next to the town rose in a steady buzzing overtone to the quiet of our hillside.

My grandmother said (translated from Okanagan), "The people down there are dangerous, they are all insane." My father agreed, commenting, "It's because they are wild and scatter anywhere."

I remember looking down into the town and being afraid.

The words my grandmother and my father used to describe the newcomers in the valley offer a way into the perspective I wish to share with you.

Since that day with my grandmother and my father, I have heard the Okanagan term-, for "insane" and "wild" used many times by many of my people to describe deeds of the newcomers that make no sense to us. I have come to discern the meanings in those terms as they are applied by an Okanagan person whose approach to life is other than that of the mainstream culture.

I have always felt that my Okanagan view is perhaps closer in experience to that of an eyewitness and refugee surrounded by holocaust. I draw on this experience of witness to frame my own comments on a social crisis that has been interpreted in various fields of study as critical. As a Native American, I have felt that crisis as a personal struggle against an utterly pervasive phenomenon. My conflict has been to unremittingly resist its entrapment, while knowing that it affects every breath I draw. Through the lens of that perspective, I view the disorder that is displayed in our city streets, felt in our communities, endured in our homes, and carried inside as personal pain. I have come to the same conclusion as my grandmother and father that day long ago when we watched the newcomers enter the valley: "The people down there are dangerous, they are all insane."

My view could be thought of as a way to differentiate from the newcomers' experience of the world. I do not wish to draw conclusions about the newcomers, culture or psychology; however, I do wish to assist in seeking junctures in philosophy at which a transformative potential may be implicit.

Okanagan: A Language That Connects

Although I will do my best to share the way I, as an Okanagan born into this maelstrom, perceive the situation, I can do this only within the limited capacity permitted by a language that does not contain the words I require. My dilemma is to use the English language in a way that brings my meaning into clarity. I find that I must do this by deconstructing meanings in English that seem to me to affirm a cloistered view of things and by constructing new meanings.

I offer a way to look at the Okanagan parallel of the word "insane" and its meaning in order to illustrate some fundamental ways in which the Okanagan language differs in process from English.

I have no trouble remembering Okanagan words uttered a considerable time ago; this is because of the way the Okanagan language replays images in the mind. Okanagan is exclusively vocally rooted; it was never a written language, never transformed into visual symbols that could be translated back into sounds. It was always spoken.

I believe it may be wise to question the idea that language is a system of sound symbols, that is, that the word, as a sound, represents something definable. My thinking is that symbols, seen as compact surrogates of things, seem to take on a concreteness in and of themselves that supplants reality. Words in that sense define the reality rather than letting the reality define itself. Language sounds would be better regarded as patterns that call forth realities, as a sort of directional signal to a time and place.

Very loosely, I describe the Okanagan language as a system of sounds through which meaning is called forth by combining a variety of syllables that describe moving pieces of an ongoing reality that stretches away from the speaker. The active reality could be thought of as a sphere sliced into many circles. A circle could be thought of as a physical plane surrounding the speaker; this could be called "the present." Moving above and below the speaker, the surrounding sphere may be thought of as the "past" or the "future," with everything always connected to the present reality of the speaker. The Okanagan language creates links by connecting active pieces of reality rather than isolating them.

Although the present tense in the English language seems all pervasive, "now" is actually an insubstantial thing that is tied to place in a very untenable way. "Now" just continues, as does all else; therefore we might perceive my meaning better if we leave the designations for "past," "present," and "future" aside and think instead of a vast thing that is continuing, in which we are immersed, and that we can call by making certain sounds.

If we put aside designations like nouns and verbs and think simply of sounds that revive components of reality from that in which we are continuously immersed, then we can think of a language that remakes little parts of a larger ongoing activity. This creates a system in which syllables are animated describers of pieces of activity and can be combined to develop meanings that then give a more complete picture, and could end up close to what might constitute a noun or a verb in English-though they are quite different to me when experienced in the mind.

Talking Talking Inside the Head

The Okanagan word for "insane" is a good example of this. The four syllables in the word, which are used to form the meaning, are each minidescriptions of an active reality. When put together they form a whole picture, which then becomes an action image describing "in a state of talking talking inside the head." Doubling the description "in the act of talking" forms a minipicture of opposing voices rather than simply many voices. The meaning of the word relies on further connection for coherence in context. It requires a larger active picture. The meaning can then become quite specific.

If I were to interpret/transliterate the Okanagan meaning of my grandmother's words, it might be this: "The ones below who are not of us [as place], may be a chaotic threat in action; they are all self-absorbed [arguing] inside each of their heads." My father's words might be something like this: "Their actions have a source, they have displacement panic, they have been pulled apart from themselves as family [generational sense] and place [as land/us/survival]."

In examining the meanings in this brief dialogue, the differences become clearer between self, community, surroundings, and time sense as understood in the mainstream culture from the Okanagan view of a healthy, whole person. I comment on my view of each only as I perceive them. I do not speak for the Okanagan people; rather I speak of my knowledge as an Okanagan.

By describing these differences, I wish to make clear why my grandmother and my father spoke those words that day long ago when we watched the newcomers enter the valley, words with which I know I agree: "The people down there are dangerous; they are all insane."

The Four Selves

The first difference I want to explore has to do with the idea of what we are as an individual life force within our skins, and how we might think that in relation to the unseen terrain we traverse as we walk the land. I speak of how we perceive that, and in consequence how we perceive the effect on the world around us.

When we, as Okanagans, speak of ourselves as individual beings within our bodies, we think of our whole being as made up of various capacities. We identify the whole person as having four main capacities that operate together: the physical self, the emotional self,

the thinking, intellectual self, and the spiritual self. The four selves can be described as having equal importance in the way we function within and experience all things. The capacities can loosely be described as what joins us with the rest of creation in a healthy way. Each, including the body, is an internal capacity parallel to what is thought of as "mind."

The physical self, which is body as one part of the whole self, is dependent entirely on everything that sustains it and keeps it alive in an interface with the parts of us that continue outside the skin. We survive within our skin inside the rest of our vast selves. We survive by how our body interacts with everything around us continuously. Only in part are we aware in our intellect, through our senses, of that interaction. Okanagans teach that the body is the Earth itself. They say that our flesh, blood, and bones are Earthbody; in all cycles in which the Earth moves, so does our body. We are everything that surrounds us, including the vast forces we only glimpse. If we cannot maintain and stay in balance with the outer self, then we cannot continue as an individual life-form, and we dissipate back into the larger self. Our body-mind is extremely knowledgeable in that way. As Okanagans we say our body is sacred; it is the core of our being, which permits the rest of self to be. It is the great gift of our existence. Our word for body literally means "the landdreaming capacity."

The emotional self is differentiated from the body-self, the thinking, intellectual self, and the spiritual self. In our language, the emotional self is thought of as the part with which we link to other parts of our larger selves around us. We use a term that translates as "heart." It is a capacity to bond and form attachment with particular parts and aspects of our surroundings. We say that we as people stay connected to each other, our land, and all things by our hearts.

As Okanagans we teach that this is an essential element of being whole, human, and Okanagan. We never ask a person, "What do you think?" Instead we ask, "What is your heart on this matter?" The Okanagan teaches that emotion or feeling is the capacity whereby community and land intersect in our beings and become part of us. By this capacity we are one with others and all our surroundings. This bond or link is a priority for our individual wholeness and well-being. The strength with which we bond in the widest of circles gives us our criterion for leadership. It is the source from which the arts spring in celebration and affirmation of our connectedness.

The thinking, intellectual self has another name in Okanagan. Our word for "thinking/logic" and "storage of information" (memory) is difficult to translate into English because it does not have a full parallel. The words that come closest in my interpretation have the meaning "the spark that ignites." We think of this capacity as simply a beginning point from which other things occur. We use a term that translates as "directed by the ignited spark" to refer to analytical thought. In the Okanagan language we translate this to mean that the other capacities we engage in when we take action are only directed by the spark of memory once it is ignited. We know in our traditional Okanagan methods of education that this self must be disciplined to work in concert with the other selves in order to engage its abilities far beyond its automatic-response capacity.

We know, too, that unless we always join this capacity to the heart-self, its power can be a destructive force both with respect to ourselves and to the larger selves that surround us. A fire that is not controlled can destroy.

The spirit-self is hardest to translate. It is also referred to by the Okanagan as a part of the individual being, while at the same time being the larger self of which all things are part. We translate the word used for our spirit-self as "without substance while moving continuously outward." The Okanagan language teaches that this self requires a great quietness before our other parts can become conscious of it, and that the other capacities fuse together and subside in order to activate something else-which is this capacity. Okanagans describe this capacity as the place where all things are. It teaches that this old part of us can "hear/ interpret" all knowledge being spoken by all things that surround us, including our own bodies, in order to bring new knowledge into existence. The Okanagan says that this is the true self, it has great power. It is a source for all things and affects all things if we engage it within the rest of our life-force activity. The Okanagan refers to it as the living source of our life.

Community: Our One Skin

The second difference I wish to discuss is our relationship as social beings to human social constructs. I want to outline how the Okanagan perceives this and how it might affect people around us.

A teaching of the Okanagan is that each person is born into a family and a community. No person is born isolated from those two things. You are born into a way of interacting with one another. As an Okanagan you are automatically a part of the rest of the community. You belong. You are them. You are-within family and community. You are that which is family and community; within that you cannot be separate. You are not separate unless you totally leave people and live alone in the land.

All are affected by the actions of any one individual within family and community, and so all must know this in their individual selves. This capacity to bond is absolutely critical to individual wellness. Without it the person is said to be "crippled/incapacitated" and "lifeless." To not have community or family is to be scattered or falling apart.

The Okanagan refers to relationship to others by a word that means "our one skin." This means that we share more than a place; we share a physical tie that is uniquely human. It also means that the bond of community and family is a history of many before us and many ahead of us who share our flesh. We are tied together by those who brought us here and gave us blood and gave us place. Our most serious teaching is that community comes first in our choices, then family, and then ourselves as individuals, because without community and family we are truly not human.

The Language of the Land

The third difference between the Okanagan perception of the self and that of the dominant culture has to do with the "us" that is place: the capacity to know we are everything that surrounds us; to experience our humanness in relation to all else and in consequence to know how we affect the world around us.

The Okanagan word for "our place on the land" and "our language" is the same, The Okanagan language is thought of as the "language of the land." This means that the land has taught us our language. The way we survived is to speak the language that the land offered us as its teachings. To know all the plants, animals seasons and construct language for them.

We also refer to the land and our bodies with the same root syllable. This means that the flesh which is our body is pieces of the land come to us through the things which the land is. The soil, the water, the air, and all other life-forms contributed parts to be our flesh. We are our land/ place. Not to know and to celebrate this is to be without language and without land. It is to be dis-placed.

The Okanagan teaches that anything displaced from all that it requires to survive in health will eventually perish. Unless place can be relearned, it compels all other life forms to displacement and then ruin. This is what is referred to as "wildness": a thing that cannot survive without special protective measures and that requires other life forms to change behavior in its vicinity.

As Okanagans, our most essential responsibility is to learn to bond our whole individual selves and our communal selves to the land. Many of our ceremonies have been constructed for this. We join with the larger self, outward to the land, and rejoice in all that we are. We are this one part of Earth. Without this self we are not human: we yearn; we are incomplete; we are wild, needing to learn our place as land pieces. We cannot find joy because we need place in this sense to nurture and protect our family/community/self. The thing Okanagans fear worst of all is to be removed from the land that is their life and their spirit.

Hands of the Spirit

The fourth difference between the Okanagan conception of the self and that of the dominant culture has to do with the idea that, as Earth pieces, we are an old life-form. As an old life-form, we each travel a short journey through time, in which we briefly occupy a space as a part of an old human presence on the land.

The Okanagan word for "Earth" uses the same root syllable as the word for our spirit-self. It is also the word for referring to all life forces as one spirit in the same way as the human spirit capacity. The Okanagan points out that all things are the same in this way. In that capacity everything we see is a spirit. Spirit is not something that is invisible, in the mind, or subjective. It exists. We are part of that existence in a microscopic way. The Okanagan teaches that we are tiny and unknowledgeable in our individual selves; it is the whole-Earth part of us that contains immense knowledge. Over the generations of human

life, we have come to discern small parts of that knowledge, and humans house this internally. The way we act in our human capacity has significant effects on the Earth because it is said that we are the hands of the spirit, in that we can fashion Earth pieces with that knowledge and therefore transform the Earth. It is our most powerful potential, and so we are told that we are responsible for the Earth. We are keepers of the Earth because we are Earth. We are old Earth.

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