

An Alliance Between Humans and Creatures

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Basic philosophical questions are raised in the course of observing and questioning people with respect to notions of inquiry, explanation, technology, science and religion as they relate to particular lifeways. Accordingly, world view as discussed here will attempt to answer the questions deftly set out by Barry Lopez. Lopez refers to “metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, aesthetics and logic—which pose, in order, the following questions. What is real? What can we understand? How should we behave? What is beautiful? What are the patterns we can rely upon?” (1986:202). Added to the above list will be “ontology:” Why are we? Is there something greater than the human? Lopez goes on to point out, “The risk we take is of finding our final authority in the metaphors rather than in the land. To inquire into the intricacies of a distant landscape, then, provokes thoughts about one’s own interior landscape, and the familiar landscapes of memory. The land urges us to come around to an understanding of ourselves” (247).

The concept of “worldview” is very closely related to the definitions of culture and cognitive map (Berger, Berger, & Kellner 1974:148). A worldview consists of the principles we acquire to make sense of the world around us. These principles, including values, traditions and customs are learned by youngsters from myths, legends, stories, family, community and examples set by community leaders (Deloria, 1991, Hardwick, 1991). The worldview, or cognitive map, is a summation of coping devices which have worked in the past, and may or may not be as effective in the present (Netting, 1986). Once a worldview has been formed, the people are then able to identify themselves as a unique people. Thus, the worldview enables its possessors to make sense of the world

around them, make artifacts to fit their world, generate behavior and interpret their experiences. As with many other indigenous groups, the worldviews of the traditional Alaska Native peoples have worked well for their practitioners for thousands of years (Kawagley, 1995).

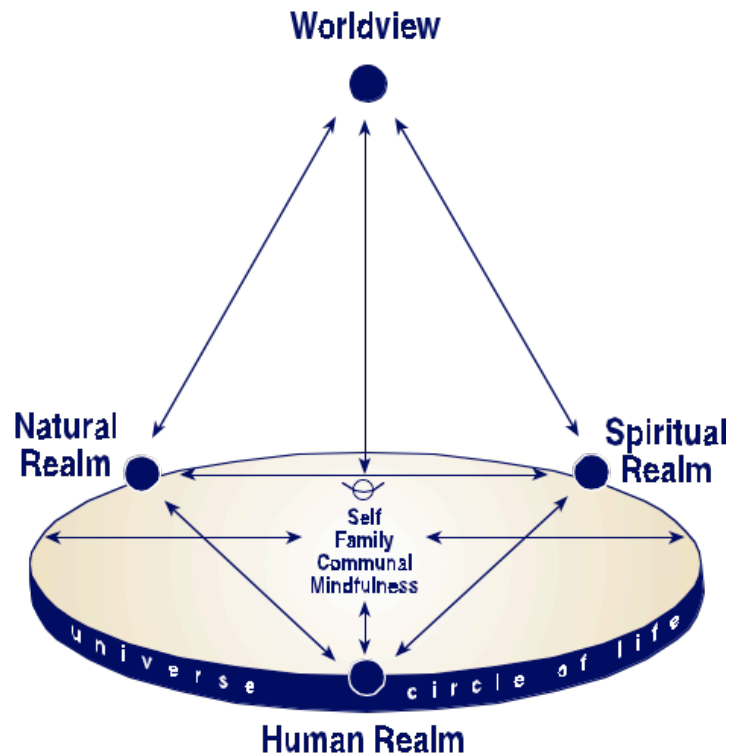
Native ways of knowing imply action, states of knowing that entail constant flux of doing. The universe and Mother Earth are constantly changing. If we are looking at and trying to make sense of the world in which we live, we must speak of it as an active process. So our Alaska Native words describe pieces of activity (Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1992). The Native words are sound symbols garnered from nature which then lend themselves to reality defining itself. The English words used to describe nature merely define nature and supplant reality. The scientific objectivity allows looking at “things” in nature and then as commodities to be used and exploited without regard to its habitat and niche in the ecological system. The institutions of higher learning teach us to look at “things” for in-depth detailed knowledge in a fragmentary approach. It allows us to develop technology to hasten our extraction of minerals, deforestation and agriculture. We are not mindful of the carrying capacity of the land and its ability to regenerate. Our affluence as industrial nations is merely a borrowed affluence. Borrowed from countries like Ghana, Philippines, Columbia, China, and India to name a few. Our technological prowess and its concomitant concepts of growth and development and that the “whole is the sum of its parts” (Mills, 1997) has brought us to the brink of disaster. I quote the following poem from Elisabeth Hermodsson (Mills, 1997):

once upon a time
we were to be pitied
we were in mortal fear
we believed in spirits, gnomes
god and other kinds of superstition
now we feel safe for we know everything
control everything
we have rational explanations
for everything
we make use of matter’s minutest particle
for our purposes
and we are much to be pitied
more than ever before
never has space been closer
never has responsibility been greater

never have we known more fear
and we do not believe in good or evil powers
nor in gods and other superstitions
we believe in ourselves
and never has space been wider
and never have we had greater power
and never have we been more powerless
we believe in progress
and never has catastrophe been so close

We certainly have a totalitarian and dehumanizing technological system. And most certainly, as a Native people, we have been unable to evaluate our satisfaction with the technological gadgets and tools that have been given or forced upon us by this all consuming giant. Its technocratic society questions the maintenance of our Native languages, subsistence, ways of knowing and Native rights to an education befitting our worldviews. But it espouses, through lip service and pronouncements, multiculturalism that many of its members deem evil. I don't remember the source of the following quote but: "Too much think about white man, no more can find dream." We have become aware of the materialistic and scientific sophistry with its inherent ability to obfuscate who we are, what we are and where we are going. After this vitriolic attack, I now get to the subject of my talk.

I have enclosed a diagram which I call the tetrahedral metaphor of the Native worldview. I have drawn a circle representing the universe or circle of life. The circle represents togetherness which has no beginning and no end. On this circle are represented the human, natural and spiritual worlds. There are two-way arrows between them as well as to the worldview at the apex of the tetrahedral. These two-way arrows depict communications between all these functions to maintain balance. The Yupiat say "Yuluni pitalkertugluni," "Living a life that feels just right." One has to be in constant communication with each of the processes to know that one is in balance. If the feeling is that something is wrong then one must be able to check to see what might be the cause for unease or disease. If the feeling of being just right comes instinctively and this feeling permeates your whole being, then you have attained balance. This means that one does not question the other functions intellectually, but that one merges spiritually and emotionally with the others. The circle brings all into one mind. In the Yupiat thought world, everything of Mother Earth possesses a spirit. This spirit is consciousness, an awareness. So the wind, river, rabbit, amoeba, star, lily, and so forth possess a spirit.



Thus, if all possess a spirit or soul, then all possess consciousness and the power that it gives to its physical counterpart. It allows the Native person the ability to have the aid of the spirit to do extraordinary feats of righting unbalanced individual psyche, community disease or loss of communication with the spiritual and natural world through irreverence toward beings of Nature. Harry Robinson (Robinson, 1992) calls this “‘nature power,’ the life-sustaining spirituality.” Dr. Grof refers to “power animals” (Grof, 1993) which gives its possessor the power to “communicate with them, adopting aspects of their wisdom or power and re-establishing links with them when the connection has been lost through negligence or lack of reverence, or by offending either the animal spirits or one of the greater spirits of the natural world.” These are not available through Western scientific research methods but through the ancient art of shamanism. From this you can see that when we rely on Western means of research only, it is a limiting factor, and this is what our institutions of higher learning teach. All areas of social and scientific research teach only one way of trying to learn and understand phenomena. Our technological and scientific training imprison the students’ minds only to its understandings, much to the detriment of the learners who enter the mainstream Western world to become its unerring members of progress and development.

The Alaska Native needed to take lives of animals to live. To give honor, respect, dignity and reciprocation to the animals whose lives were taken, the Native people conceived and put into practice many rituals and ceremonies to communicate with the animal and

spiritual beings. These are corroborated through the Alaska Native mythology which are “manifestations of fundamental organizing principles that exist within the cosmos, affecting all our lives” (Grof, 1993).

It behooves the Alaska Native person to leave something behind, such as a piece of dry fish when getting mouse food from the tundra. The mouse food is gathered in the early fall so that the mouse and its family will have an opportunity to collect more food for the winter. The seal when caught is given a drink of water so that its spirit will not be thirsty when it travels to the animal spiritual kingdom. This is done to show respect to the animal for having shared and given its life to the hunter.

Medicinal plants are gathered respectfully knowing full well their power to heal and recognizing that they were given freely by Nature, thus requiring that we share these freely. The Alaska Native person is aware that if we do not use these gifts of Nature regularly, mindfully and respectfully, they will begin to diminish through disuse or misuse. The essential elements of earth, air, water, fire and spirit must always be in balance, as each has an important niche to play in the ecological system.

With this concept in mind, we must carefully examine the lifestyles and technology that is extant in this world. Our lifestyles have become materialistic and we are given to technological devices and gadgets galore that are not always geared to sustainability. Our modern cities with their complex network of buildings, transportation structures, communications systems, and commodity distribution centers are often disjointed and given to fragmentation.

Likewise, the studies of natural resources are often approached in a fragmentary way, where an expert in harbor seals may not know what the expert in herring fish has discovered in the same ecosystem. Such research has the effect of objectifying the species studied, often for commercial purposes, and contributes little to sustaining Mother Earth. However, in the Western world of science and technology there also exists many alternative approaches that are nature-friendly and sustainable. They await the time when the global societies evolve from consumerism and materialism to an orientation toward conservation and regeneration.

Perhaps, now might be a proper time to begin to use the traditional ecological knowledge of indigenous people as a “strange attractor” that can serve as a catalyst to bring meaning and understanding to the mountains of data on phenomena across a vast spectrum of possible knowledge. We need to pay heed to the warnings and recognize the consequences of the over-manipulation of Nature: wonder drugs of a generation ago are

producing new resistant forms of bacteria; our aseptic hospitals are generating iatrogenic diseases; we are losing agricultural lands at a terrific pace; deforestation is accelerating; and global warming is a fact of life today.

I, as a Yupiaq, taught in a traditional and Western way, worry about my seven grandchildren and the legacy that I will leave behind for them. Will they be able to enjoy the biological diversity and freedom that I had growing up in a traditional Yupiaq household and village? Will they experience starvation and want because the carrying capacity of the lands has been atrociously outpaced? This behooves all of us to rethink whether our objectification and commodification of natural resources has led to the verge of catastrophe. We must strive to have the various ways of teaching and learning converge to give new direction for living, regeneration, cooperation and sharing, and thus forging a new pathway to a vision of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Thank you.