

OTHER THAN THE INTERPRETATION OF DREAMS: THE DANE-ZAA INDIANS AND THE VISION QUEST

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Abstract / Résumé

The Dane-zaa vision quest, as viewed through the legend of Swan, who originally “set the world right,” and vision quest narratives, demonstrates a uniquely Dane-zaa concept of dreams. Specifically, the Dane-zaa example suggests two important points: First, that Indigenous dreaming practices must necessarily be analyzed according to locally generated values and beliefs; secondly, that the human ability to dream—as well as acquire visions—may be “controlled” by the individual for the sake of obtaining vital knowledge about one’s environment.

La recherche de la vision des Dane-zaa, telle que comprise dans la légende du Cygne qui a originellement « redressé le monde », et les récits de recherche de la vision, démontre le concept unique des rêves chez les Dane-zaa. En particulier, leur exemple souligne deux éléments importants : premièrement, les pratiques de rêve des Autochtones doivent être analysées en fonction des valeurs et des croyances locales; deuxièmement, la capacité de rêver et d’avoir des visions peut être « contrôlée » par la personne afin d’obtenir des connaissances vitales sur son propre environnement.

“We all dream,” Lee Irwin proclaims at the beginning of *The Dream Seekers*.¹ But why do we dream? Although dreaming may be an activity in which we all share as human beings, its purpose is not as apparent as our other natural tendencies, such as sex, eating, fighting, socializing, and so on. Whereas other natural behaviors can be explained in terms of our survival capacities as a species, dreaming at first glance seems more like a luxury. Dreaming is something that we do when we have the time to sleep in or while away an afternoon. In other words, dreaming is like playing, something to be done when the demands of “real” life allow for it. Although dreaming may be a spontaneous act of the “unconscious,” deliberately talking about our dreams and analyzing them for meaning, let alone turning to our dreams for guidance or therapy, is a whole different matter. Most of us are not bourgeois Viennese women, like the infamous “Dora” who went to see Sigmund Freud. We may think that we have more “practical” things to do with our time. Yet, if thinking about dreams is merely a pastime, then why have so many different cultures taken their dreams so seriously, not just in so-called “prehistoric” times but even today? More important, what is there to gain from intentionally seeking out intense dream experiences at the possible expense of one’s safety and health, such as occurs during a vision quest? The answer to these questions, however grounded they may be in any fully developed culture—such as the one we will turn to below—are going to run against generations of dream critiques.

Western intellectuals for the most part have treated dreams disparagingly as superficial, meaningless, and even spurious functions of the mind. “People in Western culture,” moreover, as Robin Ridington states in *Trail to Heaven*, “assume that we can know and experience events only after they have begun to take place in a physical world accessible to our senses.”² Consequently, Aristotle, for example, in his short work titled *De Somniis*, thought that dreams were the consequences of leftover stimuli from our waking life, which the mind randomly assembles while we sleep into episodes that seem relevant to our lives only because they were created out of the residue of familiar things.³ René Descartes, of course, dismissed dreams altogether as being even more unreliable than the senses. In “Part Four” of *The Discourse on Method*, Descartes recounts excitedly the results of his technique of radical doubt. Upon recognizing that all men regularly make mistakes in their line of reasoning—to which Descartes realized he is no less prone—Descartes also recognized that the senses in general are much more susceptible to making errors in judgment. “Lastly,” Descartes concluded, “considering that the very thoughts we have while awake may also occur while we sleep without any of them being at that time true, I resolved to pretend

that all the things that have ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams.” It is at this point, of course, that Descartes was struck with the self-evident truth of his own thinking, which he formulated in the proposition *cogito ergo sum*, “I think therefore I am.”⁴ By reason alone, as opposed to dreams or the senses, Descartes found proof-positive that something exists beyond the illusions of the sense world. Descartes’ line of reasoning continued to influence philosophers like Edmund Husserl, who asserted that the Cartesian method of doubt inaugurates the modern critique of knowledge, with which all following philosophies have had to contend. Husserl wrote in *The Crisis of European Sciences*:

It is experience in the usual sense which is thus called into question, ‘sense’ experience—and its correlate, the world itself, as that which has sense and being for us in and through this experience, just as it is constantly valid for us, with unquestioned certainty, as simply there [*vorhanden*], having such and such a content of particular real objects [*Realitäten*], and which is occasionally devaluated as doubtful or as invalid illusion only in individual details. But from this point on, even all the accomplishments of meaning and validity which are founded on experience are called into question.⁵

Descartes, along with Galileo, pushed the Western intellectual tradition away from lived-experience and more towards mathematical abstraction. With all previous forms of non-scientific knowledge cast into doubt, including dreams, the cogito becomes the way in which we come to know the immediate world around us. Just as Descartes deduced the incontrovertible existence of the cogito, so too did he seek other self-evident certainties. What emerged was not the sensual world but the geometric one. Eventually from this premise, Descartes could infer the existence of God—the source of all truths.

Geometry then is the Western paradigm of knowledge, *par excellence*, whose axioms and corollaries can only be comprehended by reason—fully conscious of what it is deducting. “In the natural urge of life,” Husserl states in *Ideas*, “I live continually in *this fundamental form of all “wakeful” living*, whether in addition I do or do not assert the *cogito*.”⁶ But even as Husserl sought to reinstate the cogito into our lived experience with the world, he could do so only insofar as this process concluded with the apprehension of ideal objects. The ulterior motive to maintaining such a sober day world approach to consciousness was to reconnect the transcendental ego with the lived-world. The European Sciences, as Husserl labeled the western tradition, was in a state of

crisis because ever since the time of Galileo (and Descartes) knowledge had become more abstract, turning natural objects into purely mathematical concepts. Science, as it was being critiqued by post-World War I philosophers, was led into crisis the more it distanced itself from the lived-world. Instead, as a purely abstract discourse, science had become a series of propositions, criticisms, and revisions, leaving behind a stable sense of meaning and tradition.⁷ For his own part, Martin Heidegger jumped into the fray with the publication of *Being and Time* in 1927.⁸ While ostensibly addressing a classic question about metaphysics, concerning the nature of Being (*Sein*); Heidegger also acknowledged the crisis to which Husserl was referring to when Heidegger asked whether the question about Being was about “the most general of generalities, or is it rather, of all questions, both the most basic and the most concrete?” The definition of “concrete,” however, is not simply determined by one’s experience, but by science. “Scientific research accomplishes,” Heidegger writes, “roughly and naively, the demarcation and initial fixing of the areas of subject-matter,” which one can be sure does not include any subject-matter appearing in dreams. Taking into account that human perception is inherently flawed, according to Descartes, scientific research, in order to progress, must not only build upon the previous generation of findings, but also exploit the insufficiencies in what was done before. In other words, crisis becomes integral to science itself. “The real ‘movement’ of the sciences,” Heidegger states, “takes place when their basic concepts undergo a more or less radical revision which is transparent to itself.” Indeed, Heidegger detects a critical *Zeitgeist* that continues to inform the sciences to this day. “Among the various disciplines everywhere today there are freshly awakened tendencies to put research on new foundations,” be it mathematics, physics, biology, the human sciences, or theology.⁹

Nevertheless, as far Husserl was concerned, it was incumbent upon the science of philosophy—as the predecessor to all natural sciences—to reconnect this pursuit of knowledge with the world in which we live. Nonetheless, although Husserl acknowledged the human need for such things as literature, painting, and music, he stopped short of recognizing the connection between the arts and the unconscious. Particularly in “The Origin of Geometry,” Husserl stipulated that only in the day world could normal, mature communication take place, which is where philosophy claimed its territory.¹⁰

For western society, it took the likes of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung to bring dreams into the general discussion of the human mind. But even these two psychologists treated dreams pathologically, as a way of diagnosing the abnormal behavior of their respective pa-

tients. Jung in particular told an anecdote in “The Concept of the Collective Unconscious” in which he hit upon the notion of archetypes while dealing with a patient diagnosed as a “paranoid schizophrenic,” who was having visions of a phallic Sun god.¹¹ Perhaps it was because western society rediscovered its unconscious proclivities through suffering “mental illness” that the emergence of our subjective lives took a turn for the worse intellectually. David Michael Levin observes in *The Opening of Vision*, which is his phenomenological attempt at redressing the nihilism plaguing modern life:

The triumph of subjectivity is self-destructive, because it has inflated the human ego without developing self-respect, the true basis of agency, and the social character of human vision. Moreover, the triumph of “Man” necessitated the death of God. But, since God had been the sole source of our values and the origin of all meaningfulness, the death of God only accelerated the spread of a latent culture of nihilism, cancer of the spirit, contagion of despair.¹²

In a western tradition that has often regarded dissent and originality as dangerous or corrupt, it is not surprising that in the attempt to liberate the mind from the repression of the id, western intellectuals have turned the dream experience into a venue for the “abnormal.” This penchant for abnormality has often colored the interest that western psychologists have taken in non-western dreaming practices. For example, in *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson has a section on the “Sioux,” in which he is primarily concerned with how the Sioux community handles “deviant” behavior. Erikson states: “The Sioux, like other primitives, used the dream for the guidance of the strong as well as for the prevention of anarchic deviation. But they did not wait for adult dreams to take care of faulty developments; the adolescent Sioux would go out and seek dreams, or rather visions, while there was still time to decide on a life plan.”¹³ Aside from the unfortunate remark about the Lakota people being like other “primitives,” Erikson at least appreciates how the vision quest is a more effective way of treating so-called “deviant” behavior by basically doing away with the notion of “deviant behavior” in the first place.

Following Erikson’s lead, then, though not his method, we may now begin turning to Dane-zaa notions—and practices—regarding dreams. What we will gain is insight into how the world looks when dreaming is developed *along with* other cognitive functions, such as analyzing and evaluating things in the environment, responding physically or emotionally to stimuli, as well as synthesizing knowledge and information into images, symbols, and ideas. However, the Dane-zaa will not be treated

as a “case study,” in which a particular “example” will be used to demonstrate a preconceived theory or hypothesis. On the contrary, rather than making theoretical analysis the order of the day, we will instead turn to narratives about dreaming as generated by the Dane-zaa themselves. Such a narrative approach to the Dane-zaa vision quest will preclude us from reducing their customs and beliefs into analytical concepts, allowing instead for the Dane-zaa oral tradition, complete with its presumptions and metaphors, to drive the discourse. In particular, what the Dane-zaa vision quest will make clear is that there is a way to regard dreams that is not only uniquely Dane-zaa but also does not rely on “interpretation” in the positivist sense of analyzing a dream for its rational but “latent” content for its “meaning.” Rather than interpreting dreams in the psychoanalytical sense for how they can aid an individual in resolving a personal issue, dreaming in the Dane-zaa context is about learning from other-than-human powers for the sake of the greater well being of the tribe.

Although the Dane-zaa vision quest may be done with far less frequency today than in generations past, nonetheless, there is a vital record of the Dane-zaa dreaming tradition in the work of Robin Ridington.¹⁴ Ridington’s three seminal works on Dane-zaa culture, *Swan’s People* (1978), *Trail to Heaven* (1988), and *Little Bit Know Something* (1990), do a remarkable job of giving expression to a community, complete with their customs and beliefs, that is often overlooked when considering vision quest practices throughout North America.¹⁵ Of particular interest are the firsthand accounts of Dane-zaa life and ritual provided by several respected individuals in the community, covering a range of generations. Noteworthy among these contributors is Charlie Yahey, the last Dane-zaa “Dreamer.” *Naachin* or “Dreamers,” according to Ridington, “are people who have experienced the Trail to Heaven in person. They have known the experience of dying and going to heaven. Unlike ordinary people, who die once and do not return to the same body, Dreamers leave their bodies, grab hold of a song that carries them forward, and then return to earth on the trail of that same song.”¹⁶ While he is indebted to a large number of Dane-zaa, whom he acknowledges by name, including some other Dreamers, Ridington recurrently returns to Yahey as a source of insight and knowledge. In the final analysis, Charlie Yahey demonstrates that he is the intellectual equal-if not superior-to the philosophers and psychologists serving as his counterparts in the western tradition.

As for the Dane-zaa, their name means “the Real People.”¹⁷ But, more specifically, Dane-zaa signified “the people with whom one could establish a kinship connection, with whom one could discover a recip-

rocal term of relationship.”¹⁸ The Dane-zaa, or Beaver Indians, as they were known to Euro-Canadians, are an Athapaskan First Nation occupying “the region of the Peace River from the eastern base of the Rocky Mountains...along the Peace River to the falls about forty miles below Vermilion,” in present-day British Columbia.¹⁹ Historically, when Pliny Earle Goddard researched them in 1916, the Dane-zaa were a tipi-dwelling, hunter-gatherer people, living in small “camps” of about thirty persons each. These camps, however, were not necessarily stable units. The camps “changed composition frequently in adaptation to changes in the availability and distribution of resources.”²⁰ The most important of which was the availability of game animals, especially moose, rabbit, and caribou. The Dane-zaa did not engage in any agriculture, and what they gathered was “limited to chokecherries, saskatoon, and other berries, and probably a few roots.”²¹ The Dane-zaa economy, however, went through some drastic changes during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. More specifically, they were beset by both European fur traders and the western Cree, both of whom were impinging upon the Peace River area due to western colonialism.²² As Ridington summarizes the situation:

Symbolic values as well as physical patterns of association were radically altered by the new economy. The fur bearing animals which had previously been among the most powerful of the medicine animals, became objects of purely utilitarian interest, taken for their exchange value in procuring the manufactured items on which the Dunne-za now found themselves dependent. These included firearms, knives, wire for snares, tea and tobacco, but did not include food. The caloric energy on which their lives depended still had to be obtained from the diminished resources of the natural environment.²³

In response to this dramatic change in the course of Dane-zaa history, Dreamers were called upon to make sense of current events. Makenunatane stands tallest among this generation of Dreamers. His life is likened to Saya’s, the culture hero who sets the world right. Charlie Yahey states: “Makenunatane is the one who made all this world good for us. After Makenunatane made all this world good, there have been lots of prophets. Long time ago it was not good.... Makenunatane told people that only good ghosts are going to heaven.”²⁴ Just as important, Makenunatane maintained the communal hunt that was at the heart of Dane-zaa life and culture. He also inaugurated the Prophet Dance, which was and remains an antidote to the travails brought on by White men.²⁵ In order to keep the Dane-zaa world running, Makenunatane began a

practice among the people in which he exhorted them “to dance along the sun’s path”—under a specially constructed dance lodge—“in a circle around [a] fire in order to shorten their...journey along their own trail [to heaven] as ghosts.” The songs sung during this occasion were acquired by the Dreamer during his personal sojourn to “heaven,” from where he returns with the words given to him by Dane-zaa ancestors.

With respect to dreaming in general, it has played a major role in the Dane-zaa pursuit of sustenance. This is corroborated by their oral tradition, in which a significant number of stories, not only make a connection between hunting and the vision quest, but also begin with the premise that people were starving.²⁶ Indeed, as Goddard observed, “The struggle to secure a sufficient supply of food seems to have been especially severe for the Beaver.”²⁷ Hunting skills, and the acquisition of hunting power, therefore were at a premium in Dane-zaa country. At the same time, the relationship between hunter and hunted did not place the hunter in a superior role. On the contrary, animals are perceived as embodying what for lack of a better term we must call ‘supernatural’ powers. After all, according to Charlie Yahey, the animals were created by supernatural powers themselves, such as Yagesati, who created the very earth in which the Dane-zaa dwell, and Saya (or Swan), who “made everything right on this world.”²⁸ Naturally then, as Jean-Guy A. Goulet observes, animals are ‘seen not only as game but as powerful, sentient beings,’ who both dominate the land outside of camp, as well as “go out of their way to contact humans to give them a power or information that they would otherwise not possess.”²⁹ For most Dane-zaa, this information comes in the form of a *ma yine*, an animal’s song. Indeed, as Ridington observes, every “normal adult is expected to have acquired some form of *ma yine*.”³⁰ But, as Ridington further points out, the *ma yine* is fundamentally different from the songs acquired by Dreamers, which are called *naáchene yine* or *ahata yine*, “dreamers” songs or God songs.³¹

Derived from the foregoing is the notion that both animals and dreams need to be comprehended within what Robin Ridington calls a ‘shamanic cosmology,’ which includes “the beliefs and practices associated with the vision quest,” as well as “dreaming and the acquisition and use of personal medicine powers.”³² This is not to suggest moving our discourse into the “mystical” realm, as Lucien Lévy-Bruhl once argued, but rather to work with the practical assumption that animals, hunting, and the vision quest are themselves derived from mythological precedents, which contain the body of knowledge that generations of ancestors accumulated about the “right way” to live in their environment. In other words, as Lévy-Bruhl more appropriately asserts in *Primitive Mythology*, “everything...which makes up our daily experience of life, is and must

be what it is, because of its participatory involvement in the origins of life, in the events and beings of the mythic beginnings of time." Consequently, "if everything—beings, objects, and facts—is what it appears to be, that is because there existed in the mythic age models and precedents for them, and they were all created in the image of these."³³ A counterpart to this in Dane-zaa thought is found in the way they regard animals. According to Tommy Attachie, "Any kind of animals have their giant bosses. They are all small, just like kids for those giant ones." Moreover, as Charlie Yahey illustrates this point, "Under the springs there is a great big moose, a giant moose. That is why all the moose on this world stay near those places."³⁴

With this in mind, we are compelled to look to the "origins" of the Dane-zaa world. For we have to remember that the earth and the Dane-zaa were created "together." As mentioned, "Man" is not at the pinnacle of Creation nor, for that matter, is "he"—or really "they"—an alien imposition into the environment. On the contrary, the Peace River area and the Dane-zaa are as one family. "The Dane-zaa creation story," Ridington notes, "is based upon the widely distributed earth diver motif."³⁵ At the same time, the Dane-zaa maintain, as Yahey corroborates, that knowledge of the world's origins is a part of their collective memory as Dane-zaa. Yahey states, "The people who lived a long time ago all knew about how the world was first made."³⁶ Similar to many creation stories, the Dane-zaa also spoke of the earth's destruction and re-creation.³⁷ This is a cycle, of course, according to the Prophet Dance tradition, which may occur again.

When the world was created the first time there "was just water and no land." Yagesati then "made a big cross that he floated up on the water." Then, once the cross was settled, Yagesati "called all the animals that stay in the water." Yagesati in turn sent each creature down into the water to look for some earth, "but they just came out. They couldn't get it. Too far down." Finally, it was "rats" (or muskrat) who succeeded in bringing back some "dirt," which Yagesati commanded to grow. Upon completing this island, Yagesati set the sun in motion. The sun began its ascent from behind the mountains in the east, turning the sky red. Then, as the sun followed its path across the sky it turned to yellow as it reached the noon hour. Eventually, though, it began to set behind the mountains in the west, turning the sky red once again. Upon nightfall, the white moon, which is the sun's soul, or "wandering shadow," rose into the sky. In fact, Ridington notes: "Both sun and moon are called 'sa' and are distinguished by referring to them respectively as 'daytime sa' and 'nighttime sa'."³⁸ Once the days were in motion, the four seasons emerged, each one following the path of the sun. From the east

came spring when the trees and plants begin to bud. From the south came summer when the warm winds blow. Then, from the west came fall, when the leaves turn and the plants begin to wither. Finally, from the north came winter, when all the plants and trees have died. "He made all the trees for animals to live on," as Yahey continues, "and all those willows and grasses and other plants. He didn't make the plants wrong.... Then he asked all the animals to choose which thing he wanted to live on."³⁹ The world then that is described in the creation story is the setting in which all subsequent events would take place.⁴⁰

One of the most important events that took place in the Dane-zaa world was the story of a child named Swan (also known as Saya). This narrative sets the stage for the way in which the Dane-zaa would pursue their vision quest and the manner they would initiate their children into adulthood. "The isolation of this child," Ridington states, "and his acquisition of competence and control through the intercession of a supernatural helper, represents the essential structure of the typical Dane-zaa vision quest experience."⁴¹ The story is also an object lesson on the nature of dreams, in which one actually learns something valuable from the experience. After all, it may be said of the Dane-zaa what Lee Irwin said of Plains Indian cultures, that there is no distinction "drawn between the waking state and the visionary state: they are one and the same."⁴² Consequently, the notion of what counts as an experience extends into realms that the Western intellectual tradition, from Aristotle to Descartes and Husserl, has tended to discount as meaningless.

Before reaching puberty, Swan sets-off on his first rabbit hunt. He is using a bow that his father made for him. "Swan was a good shot," as Johnny Chipesia tells this story. "He couldn't miss anything with his bow. He got everything he shot at."⁴³ Swan's stepmother however insists on accompanying him on his hunting trip. Swan agrees. The stepmother then tells Swan to shoot the rabbits in their heads, which he does with no trouble at all. Curiously, the stepmother took each dying rabbit and put it between her legs, where it kicked and scratched her. When asked why she did this, the stepmother answered that it made the rabbit die faster. "When they got back to camp the father went to sleep with his wife and saw that her legs were all scratched up and covered with dried blood."⁴⁴ When Swan's father asks his wife what happened, she accuses Swan of molesting her during the hunting trip. Swan's father believes his wife and becomes furious with his son. Although Swan and his stepmother are not blood relatives, Swan's father cannot bear the thought of their having shared the same woman.

Consequently, Swan's father takes him to an island out west, under the pretense of taking him on a fishing trip, where Swan is abandoned

and left to die from starvation. Swan pleads with his father to believe him about what happened with his stepmother during the rabbit hunt. Swan's father ignores his son and disappears into the distance. Alone, Swan cries himself to sleep, hungry and scared; but while he sleeps, he hears a "voice" in his dreams. "The voice said, 'Why do you cry? Don't cry. You're going to live'."⁴⁵ The voice tells him to spread pitch around on the rocks that are exposed to the sun. Upon awaking from his dream he does as instructed, then he waits. It is not long before game birds, such as ducks and geese, land on the rocks and become stuck there, making them easy to kill. Because of this, Swan is able to eat and survive. Moreover, it is due to the voice's assistance that Swan has enough to eat when fall turns into winter. He is even able to fashion a shelter for himself.

During this time, Swan planned for his father's return. He avoided leaving any signs of his survival at the point where his father had abandoned him. So, when Swan's father returns during the spring he is surprised not to find his son's bones on the shore. Concerned, the father began walking around the island in search of his son. Swan meanwhile watches his father from afar. At the right moment, Swan steals away in his father's canoe, leaving his father behind to perish.

As Swan makes his getaway he begins thinking about revenge against his stepmother. Swan's anger grows against her. Upon seeing her stepson Swan's stepmother flees into the ocean, but Swan shoots arrows into the water, making it boil. "That is how Swan killed that bad woman. After that, Swan became a man but he stayed with a big animal, a monster that ate people, called onli nachi, something big."⁴⁶

At first glance, insofar as we are dealing with dreaming, Swan's story may seem more like a nightmare than a vision. He is wrongly accused, unjustly punished by being abandoned and left to starve; then, in the end, he is driven to kill both his father and stepmother. What could possibly be of cultural value in such a story, such that a tradition would be born from it? The answer lay in the voice that spoke to Swan while he was "dreaming." It came to him during the most desperate of situations, while he was separated from anything back home that could have provided him comfort and safety. Just when he may have thought there was no hope to be had, *he receives a message that saves his life.*⁴⁷ At least, the message saves his life only when he does as he is instructed. The lesson then is that there are beings out there, other-than-human, who are willing to help if only one knows how to listen. What this says about dreaming, especially when it hits the intensity of a vision, is that what may be a luxury for modern Westerners was an important means of endurance for people like the Dane-zaa. Dreaming then is more than just about fantasizing or dealing with relationship issues, it is also about

gaining much needed access to a supernatural power. This kind of power is necessary because humans are ultimately weak. Moreover, they survive, not because they are stronger or smarter than the animals, but because some animal boss took pity on someone and gave him something of value, such as a *ma yine*, “literally his, hers, or its song, or in English is referred to as medicine power.”⁴⁸

Protected now by the medicine power he gained during his ordeal on the island, Swan becomes a “monster slayer.” For there are giant animals killing people, making it unlikely that they will survive in the world, such as it is during this time. Apparently, Yagesati created the giant animals. “He made those giant animals from the stars that he sent down to the earth,” as Charlie Yahey claims. Then, as Yahey continues:

Everybody ran away from those giant animals that ate people but that one person [Swan / Saya] only looked after them. He just kept on like that...He killed a great big giant animal, onli nachi, and he cut him all into pieced [sic]. He cut it into little pieces and scattered them all over.⁴⁹

Then, one could say because of the power that Swan gained from “the voice” mentioned above, he also became a creative force in the world, unlike the monsters he slew. Above all, Swan changes the course of events in which people are eaten by giant animals and makes it so that people will now be the pursuers. The Dane-zaa would imitate this in terms of hunting animals and turning them into food. As Yahey further points out:

He would throw one [piece of onli nachi] and say “you are going to be this or that kind of animal....” He made different kinds of animals from that one big giant one; every kind. For a start he threw one piece of meat and made weasel; second he made martin and kept on like that to make everything in the world.⁵⁰

Swan was also responsible for making all of the animal “bosses,” similar to the giant moose mentioned above. “some of the animals he didn’t kill,” as Yahey observes, “He just chased them under the ground.... That’s why the ground goes high” in certain places.⁵¹ In the end though the world was set right. This was all due to the power Swan gained from his vision, which he honored by following its guidance.

Between Swan and the muskrat, the nadir and zenith of human experience are set. Following Swan’s example, dreaming is thought of as the mind or soul’s “movement along an imaginary trail to other places than those in which a person physically finds himself [or herself].”⁵² It is this way because Swan made it possible by doing it first. Similar to Swan, the vision quest begins before puberty sets in. It is a time, especially for

children, as Robin and Tonia Ridington emphasize in "The Inner Eye of Shamanism," when the mother seems "harmful." For as the child reaches puberty, he becomes aware of sex, and "being unready for it, sees it as a destructive force." A child in this stage of his life is likened to the moose during rutting season, when "they go crazy and charge humans." What he needs during such an unwieldy time is the wisdom of the "white-haired men." It will be the white-haired men who will teach their young charge about how the world was created and how Swan made everything right; it will also be the time when a child embarks on his first vision quest. What the child will gain in the process is not only a *ma yine* but also the ability to control one's soul or "shadow" as it leaves the body to wander about. "The human being," Ridington notes, "is believed to dream naturally but must learn to control the natural tendency of the shadow to leave its body in order to survive and grow to maturity."⁵³ The vision quest in this regard facilitates the individual's maturation. More specifically, the individual's growth will follow the seasonal path set down by Yagesati. "As the winter season of the year passes," the Ridingtons write, "and spring returns, so does the winter of a child's youth pass. He has gone full circle.... Each day each person relives the cycle of life. But after a child has passed through the four quarters of his life once, his direction is toward the center."⁵⁴ This is to say that he has reached the age at which he is ready to start understanding the nature of the world in which he lives, and the role he must play in it.

As mentioned above, the Dane-zaa child will seek in particular a *ma yine*, which is modeled "after the songs that are the cries of giant prototypical animals represented in myth."⁵⁵ In order to acquire this song, the child will travel away from camp into the bush, just as his shadow travels away from his body at night. "The camp," as Robin Ridington writes in *Little Bit Know Something*, "is associated with women and family life and the bush with men and the animals they mysteriously go out to hunt and miraculously bring back to be transformed into food by the women."⁵⁶ The bush is a place uninhabited by humans, which is characterized by the animal ways that thrive in it. Going into the bush then on a vision quest means joining the world of animals. For only if "a child has the right thoughts, if his head is in the right place," will "a medicine animal...come to him." But an animal will do this only if it "accepts" the vision seeker. Anticipating this, a child must try to not be afraid, which can be very difficult under the circumstances. In particular, one may have to fight the desire to runaway and go back to camp. This is in spite of the fact that the child was not raised to fear nature, as the natural environment was an everyday part of his life. Nonetheless, he may feel abandoned like Swan, and scared about his survival. But if the child is

fortunate he will enter a “transformation when he is “just like drunk” or in a dreamlike state.”⁵⁷ At this point the meeting between an animal and the vision seeker is one in which the child will understand the animal’s speech. During this time, which may seem to be “for days or even weeks,” the animal visiting a vision seeker imparts its song, then eventually tells the child when it’s time to return to camp. Having been immersed in the bush, the child lurks “outside the people’s camp, afraid of the smell of smoke and unable to understand human speech.” In time, he is spotted and brought back into camp, where his relatives give him food and water and one of the white-haired men puts his “medicine coat” around the child so he can sleep. Upon awaking the child returns to the Dane-zaa as one of them, understanding their words again. This is to say, the child needs to pass through the boundary of sleep in order to fully return from the dreamlike world of the bush to the day world of camp life. However, what the vision seeker cannot do is reveal the content of his experience, especially the *ma yine* he has brought back with him.⁵⁸ “The childhood vision quest experience is private and secret,” as Ridington explains. “If a child reveals the story that came to life during the dream space alone in the bush, the power may turn against him.”⁵⁹ Only the old people, such as the white-haired men, will have some idea, due to their years of experience with animals and the bush, of what has happened with the vision seeker upon his return to camp.

But *where* has this child been? We cannot answer this question authoritatively, for we have reached a limit imposed by the endemically narrow scope of a research essay. Since neither Ridington nor the author is a Dane-zaa who has been through this personal experience, our understanding is only indirect at best. “I cannot tell you what ‘really happens’ to children in the bush,” Ridington explains, “just as they cannot tell other people their experience directly.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Ridington, as noted, likens the bush during the vision quest to the world we encounter when we dream, though it is not dreaming *per se*. Yet, because of the fasting involved, the vision seeker is also not fully sober and alert, such as the western intellectual tradition would have things. The mind of everyday life has given way to an alternate state of being, not quite conscious, not quite asleep. It is tempting to call this state of mind a daze, but this would wrongly suggest that the vision seeker is merely dazzled, stupefied, or bewildered from lack of food and sleep. If the vision seeker can be said to go through such a daze he does not end his quest in such a state. There is a point where one pushes through to the “other side.” At this juncture, one achieves the alacrity that one exhibits while dreaming. During a dream, we all sense ourselves as being cognizant of the “things” around us, yet, true to the nature of dreaming, we are also open

to the extraordinary occurring, such as animals speaking to us. Still, "it is clear," as Ridington observes, "that the experience goes far deeper than learning the habits of animals and attaining a rapport useful for hunting in later life."⁶¹ On one level, the child has merely walked into the bush behind his people's camp. On another level, the child, as vision seeker, entered a dimension that defines the transition into the myth world. This is not a literal journey between two points in the landscape, but a metaphorical passage from one state of being to another. "It is a stage of developing independence," as Robin and Tonia Ridington describe this transition, "or rather, of transferring dependence from parents to animal protectors and thus identifying himself with the objects of his livelihood."⁶²

By virtue of the vision quest experience, the child who is now becoming a young adult is learning how to control his shadow while he dreams. This includes sleeping with his head facing in the direction of the sunrise, so that his shadow will return to his body with the dawn of the new day. "The return of a dreamer's shadow to his body is symbolized by the return of the sun to the morning sky."⁶³ Once a young person has his medicine power, he may appeal to it in his endeavors at hunting game. Just as in camp, the hunter sleeps with his head facing sunrise. While out hunting, though, "The hunter's shadow is believed to travel in imagination along the trail that lies ahead of him." Since the hunter is faced with the challenging task of finding game, there ought not to be any other human trails—least of all, from menstruating women—between the hunter and the animals he is hunting.⁶⁴ If these conditions can be met, then "Through his dream shadow control, the hunter seeks to recognize the trail ahead of him that will lead to success."⁶⁵

At the same time, every Dane-zaa vision seeker has a different vision experience. While they may all partake in a common mythology in a common landscape; nevertheless, like the limited number of notes in the music scale, an almost limitless number of combinations is possible. The path to self-discovery, though, emerges over a long stretch of time. "The vision quest represents," as Ridington portrays it, "a developmental stage between the families of orientation and procreation. During this stage [the vision seeker] symbolically moves from the western to the northern phase of his maturation," following the axis that Yagesati laid down.⁶⁶ Reaching the east again means reaching another spring, such as when Swan's father returned and found a man who could outwit him instead of a dead child's bones. When spring came a cycle had been completed and Swan departed with his medicine power. "The path," as Ridington states, "his life has taken from the moment of his birth has come full circle, and he is ready to begin other paths to the

completion of other circles.”⁶⁷ Swan had grown and he knew how to slay the “monsters” that made the land dangerous for the people. Similarly, after a vision quest, a child learns the way of the hunter, making the transition from being vulnerable to animals to knowing how to track them. “When a child-man,” as Ridington also says about this turning-point, “becomes one of the core adults of a band and has his own children... the experience of his preadolescent vision quest and postadolescent maturity come together in a powerful symbolic synthesis. He dreams.”⁶⁸ In other words, what the vision seeker learned while he was still too young to fully understand, begins to make sense as he takes on the responsibilities of being an adult.

What happens when one reaches this point is that eventually the vision seeker begins to “dream back” to his experience in the bush and he will know that it is time to gather tokens for his medicine bundle. “The bundle is an outward sign of inner growth,” as Ridington interprets this ritual. “It can only be put together on the authority of the dream that goes back to the child’s vision.”⁶⁹ Dreaming back then reveals the intrinsic link between myth, dream, and everyday life, which each individual Dane-zaa may discover for himself. “In the dreams” after the vision quest, Ridington says, one “sees himself as a child living in the bush and knows that the stories he has both taken for granted and taken literally are about *him*.”⁷⁰ Myth, dream, and life begin to merge together at this point. Before going on his first vision quest, the child listened to stories about “real” people and creatures, without connecting what was being said to anything occurring in his own life. During the vision quest, the child was alone and afraid in the bush just like Swan, awaiting a message from an animal or maybe even Yagesati himself. This experience inextricably connected Swan’s story with the life of the vision seeker. “When he entered the world of animals as a child, he also entered the stories.”⁷¹ Consequently, dreaming back to the vision quest reveals someone who is no longer merely recreating a myth, but whose very dreams have become parts in the mythic cycle. This is the secret into which a child is initiated, thereby making him a man. Furthermore, since many Dane-zaa stories are driven by plots of starvation and survival, learning about the connection between oneself and what these stories relate about the nature of the world in which the Dane-zaa dwell means learning about one’s responsibility in such an environment, which may be either as a hunter or a dreamer. It is with this in mind that a young person, when he or she begins dreaming back to one’s vision experience, gathers the appropriate items for his medicine bundle. Dreamers, on the other hand, create objects that are much more publicly displayed. Ridington notes:

Dreamers bring back not only songs from heaven but

also visual images of heaven (yage), the gate to heaven (yage itunne), and the trail to heaven (yaga'tunne). These images are drawn on moosehide or paper and are treated with great reverence. They are brought out on ceremonial occasions and their significance explained to people by a dreamer.⁷²

The medicine bundle, in turn, is done in secret. The Dane-zaa individual puts objects into "a plainly wrapped bundle" symbolizing the contents of his vision quest dreams. "The bundle is a physical representation of a story becoming active in a person's life," as Ridington demonstrates this stage of development, "but it does not give any clues to the identity of the story or its powers."⁷³ The bundle itself will hang over where its owner sleeps, marking a boundary between camp and the bush. As already mentioned, the medicine bundle is an outward sign of inner growth—in particular, the owner has moved from the north to the east again. He knows that he has made this transition because his dreams disclose this to him. For the Dane-zaa this means being on a particular point on the path that the sun initiated after it first arose from behind the mountains in the east. The medicine bundle symbolizes this cosmic turn of events. "A man is unmistakable," Ridington says, "because of his medicine bundle hanging behind where he sleeps and testifying to his existence even in his physical absence."⁷⁴

The medicine bundle's contents, however, will be disclosed incrementally over many years. As the contents are revealed, that individual's life will slowly be associated in some way with stories from the Dane-zaa oral tradition. Furthermore, as these associations are made, the space around this person will change. This phenomenon becomes more distinctive as a person ages. "During the course of daily life in camp," Ridington recounts, "I observed that the space around these old people was treated differently from other spaces."⁷⁵ Younger Dane-zaa are expected to know what to do and not do around each individual Elder. Behavior around these Elders is determined by what others know about them with respect to their medicine powers, that is to say, the contents of their medicine bundle.

While living among the Dane-zaa, Ridington learned that there were certain old men and women who did not eat berries, throw eggshells into a campfire, enjoy camera flashes, the sound of a stretched string, or playing a drum. Slowly, indirectly, like a Dane-zaa child, Ridington learned the tales about these Elders and the powers they held in their medicine bundle. The most important thing that Ridington learned about the old people in camp was the myths with which they were identified. "Their personal identity and actions," as Ridington recalls these Elders' presence in camp, "bring stories from the realm of long ago and far away

into the center of camp life.” Red berries, eggshells, and camera flash link to stories about the power of Thunderbird, whose red eyes flash lightning and whose eggs are laid in nests high in the mountains. The sound made by stretched string was used by giant Spider Man to lure his human game to a giant web. Frogs, living like people beneath the lakes, used drums in the gambling games they played with one another.⁷⁶

As others become more acquainted with the contents of a medicine bundle, they begin to associate that person with the characters and legends from their oral tradition. The special space around Dane-zaa Elders signifies that an important journey has been completed within the Dane-zaa cosmos, culminating in the stories that emerge as a part of that person’s identity. “When the children return to camp from the bush,” as Ridington describes this merging of life and story, “they can look to the old people within themselves.” Furthermore, as Ridington continues:

They can look ahead to the circle of their lives, to telling secrets of the vision quest. In the span of life between child and old person, the medicine stories of a child’s experience alone in the bush become an old person’s stories known by everyone in camp. The stories become real in the theater of their telling. They always remain secrets, but during the course of a lifetime become known to a widening circle of people. By the manner of their telling secrets, Dane-zaa children establish themselves as people of knowledge. Thus, the story of an individual’s life becomes part of the stories known to all. This diffusion of information balances the vision quest, during which a story known to all becomes part of the child’s experience.⁷⁷

In the end, a concern for survival turns dreaming into ritualized behavior that bonds the Dane-zaa community together. More to the point, the vision quest gives a coherent form to the collective concerns that the Dane-zaa recurrently had about finding game and averting starvation, thereby enabling them to exert some control over an otherwise uncontrollable phenomenon-hunger. By connecting their visions with their oral tradition, the Dane-zaa recreate the story of their creation, in which Swan set the world right. This has been the case from Swan to Makenunatane, and continuing with the life of Charlie Yahey. The vision quest serves to maintain that equilibrium, which allows for communal sustenance and contentment to prevail. Towards this end, the individual Dane-zaa attains personal growth by participating in the redressing of the collective good, which is really a concern for the well being of one’s relatives. This is complemented by each Dane-zaa’s participation in the

Prophet Dance. “Just as the space around a person with ma yine power,” Ridington proclaims, “must be respected and the path his dreams will follow kept clear, the dreamer who brings back ahata yine must also be taken seriously,” lest the people “bring on the processes of world destruction.”⁷⁸ Following the path laid down by Swan and Makenunatane, then, complete with vision quest, medicine bundle, and Prophet Dance, enables the Dane-zaa to accomplish two very important social objectives. First, “walking the trail to heaven” enables the individual to do good deeds, thereby making their soul “light” and their journey to heaven easier.⁷⁹ Secondly, by “following the turns of the songs brought down from heaven by the dreamers, people affirm to one another their sense of common kinship and the adaptive interdependence on which survival in their way of life depends.” Refusing to dance, therefore, is not only self-destructive but also blatantly anti-social. “Part of the dreamer’s responsibility is to see that people participate in the dance. He dreams, not just for himself, but for everybody.”⁸⁰

Similar to Lee Irwin in *The Dream Seekers*, we have been working against the grain of western dream analysis. “If we forget or do not attend to our dreams,” Irwin reflects on the condition of western society, “it is because our cultural environment does not support a means by which dreaming could transform and revitalize our awareness.”⁸¹ Because of this bias, we must make ourselves aware that Indigenous cultures like the Dane-zaa-or, for that matter, the Plains Indians of Irwin’s analysis-do not typically exhibit the kind of skepticism about dreams that has characterized the western tradition from Aristotle to Husserl. To the contrary, dreaming among Indians conjoins the domain of the immediate, everyday world with the domains of the individual self and collective history. “A successful religious theory of dreams,” Irwin asserts, “needs to take into consideration the long-enduring psychohistorical development of shared belief, shared imagery, and shared social and symbolic processes that underlie the dreaming experiences of the individual.” To dream then means to try and bridge “our many shared dreaming and waking worlds.” When this is accomplished both the individual dreamer and his or her culture may be transformed.⁸²

The tendency among ethnographers — not including Ridington — has been to relegate dreams to what can be used to advance their own theories about “culture,” such as occurred with Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict.⁸³ More often, Indigenous dream narratives were appropriated by psychologists like Freud and Jung who wanted examples for a comprehensive theory of dreams. At least, this was the case when dreams were not altogether dismissed as irrelevant to the more serious work of analyzing the material aspects of a given culture.⁸⁴ In this spirit, Jung

made a rather interesting remark about the necessity of knowing about “primitive” cultures as a prerequisite for appreciating dreams.

I have mentioned before that dream-interpretation requires, among other things, specialized knowledge. While I am quite ready to believe that an intelligent layman with some psychological knowledge and experience of life could, with practice, diagnose dream-compensation correctly, I consider it impossible for anyone without knowledge of mythology and folklore and without some understanding of the psychology of primitives and of comparative religion to grasp the essence of the individuation process, which, according to all we know, lies at the base of psychological compensation.⁸⁵

Indian mythology is central as well to understanding the vision quest and its concomitant psychic events. Rather than promoting “individuation” in the sense that Jung gave to this term, in which the uniqueness of one’s personality is emphasized, the vision quest is a means for socialization, i.e., making the individual a part of the group. This occurs because there is a common mythology at the basis of all visionary experiences, in which knowledge is handed-down that is fundamental to communal well being. This well being includes, not only social harmony coupled with material wealth and physical prowess, but also the comfort taken in knowing that the world is running due to honoring the other-than-human powers who ultimately control it.

The vision therefore must be comprehended as a form of “encounter” with these other-than-human powers. More to the point, the vision places one in contact with “mythically defined sources of personal empowerment,” in which the vision is “a manifestation of the mysterious contents of a visionary world.”⁸⁶ Because of this, dreams and visions can compel their recipients to make significant changes in their lives, including how one thinks and believes about things affected by the dream. Visions moreover can even “influence communally patterned experience and interpretation,” such as occurred with Makenunatane.⁸⁷ The vision has this power over individuals and communities because they believe in the relevance of dreams.⁸⁸ Unlike the western intellectual tradition that often feels like it knows more the more it debunks or demystifies things, Indigenous cultures are certain that they have a more profound appreciation for the world by presupposing that the world is ultimately mysterious, in the sense of being sacred and thereby beyond the realm of “philosophic reason.”⁸⁹ Yet, dreams are a source of knowledge. More specifically, they constitute an “existential encounter” with an “alternate” mode of awareness.⁹⁰ This awareness for the “developed dreamer” ena-

bles him to experience the *transformation* of his lived world into something “mythic and superordinate.”⁹¹ Such a transformation goes against the ratio-centric discourse of much of Western philosophy and science. Furthermore, Indian visionary experiences go beyond mere empiricism. Although the content may be familiar across many visions, what happens in a vision is by no means predictable. “The visionary episteme is situated in a mythically defined environment with a unique history in terms of both the mythic contents and the means for transmission of that visionary knowledge.”⁹²

Because of the fundamental nature of the visionary experience, one cannot satisfactorily “interpret” dreams because they contain both the “known” and the “mysterious.” The visionary landscape and the lived landscape are “enfolded” into one another.⁹³ What is revealed is that “there is a world-process of ongoing, explicit manifestations of an implicit, emerging higher order dynamics that continues to *unfold* over generations through a series of recognized perceptions coupled with new interpretive perspectives.” The visionary realm is a part of our total range of perception; however, there are no fixed components, “there are only relative degrees of unfolding perception.” “To enter the dream world means, in this sense, to alter consciousness and enter into an implicit dreaming order—the unfolded, psychic potential of the visionary realm—that has a structural, morphological effect on consciousness.”⁹⁴ At the same time, the “self-consistency” that arises from this is far from rigid (or dogmatic); innovation and integration are ongoing features. “Among the Plains and Prairie peoples, the enfolded order is the realm of experience that is accessible to the visionary dreamer.”⁹⁵ This is what also happened when Makenunatane revised the Prophet Dance to meet the Dane-zaa’s need to address the changing economic and political environment caused by European westward expansion.

There is a dialogue that persists between dreamer, culture, and sacred beings, entailing that the status quo may be altered when an individual, like Makenunatane, manifests a new power or at least a new use to a familiar power. “Interpretations form only a secondarily developed area of concern or interest.” Most Indigenous cultures have a more pragmatic interest in dreams: Can the dreamer *use* the power given to him? Irwin states:

“The visionary language of belief and experience is part of a holistic relationship between the visionary and the world of explicit phenomena—the sky, the earth, this tree, that butte, this rock, that feather—all of which embody varying degrees of the visionary world and help unfold the potential of a world revealing process. It is the experienced dreamer’s

role to explicate that world, to show how the part expresses the whole and how the visionary experience is the door into the hidden order of potential and personal empowerment.”⁹⁶

At this point it should be clear that the Dane-zaa notion of dreaming is inexplicable within the Western theoretical tradition. By the same token, the Dane-zaa concept of dreams would be an inadequate way of “explaining” the dreams of modern, urban Westerners. Despite Jung’s advice, learning about “primitive” folklore and religion is insufficient for gaining insight into the psyche of modern man. For modern men and women no longer live in the kind of environment in which the Dane-zaa once lived. For that matter, the Dane-zaa no longer live in the same world that they once did.⁹⁷ Although there are still places in the world where hunting and hunger are still defining elements of life, such conditions generally do not exist in the west where the dream theories we looked at above from Aristotle to Husserl were generated. Consequently, when Freud and Jung “discovered” the “unconscious” and the “collective unconscious,” respectively, the dreams they analyzed had less to do with group survival and more to do with personal psychic ailments. However, rather than turn to their own religious leaders and their own rituals, modern men and women turn to science; and in the case of problems pertaining to one’s psyche people turn specifically to psychology.

In the “Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious,” Jung states that Western people need psychology precisely because they no longer benefit from the religions and mythologies that once bound them together. Christian mythology, in particular, has grown stale for many people, especially in intellectual circles, where myths and meditation have been replaced by texts and interpretations.⁹⁸

By turning to psychology, Westerners are looking to the tradition that they have come to rely on in place of religion, which is science. Insofar as psychology presumes to be a science, it can provide new answers for the old questions once addressed by, say, Holy Scripture. Unfortunately, like any other science, psychology has the potential to do nothing more than use its analytical tools to demystify what was once the foundation of our selves, which was the soul. In its place is a set of personality traits that in turn may be afflicted with psychological “complexes.” In this context the self is not a being to nurture and develop along a path traveled by others in one’s community; but instead, the self is something to be “treated” with “therapy” because it has been “wounded” in some way by negative life-events. Consequently, when modern man or woman dreams, it is no longer one’s soul that leaves the body to encounter experiences in the dream world; dreaming instead is contained only within the unconscious where it becomes a medium for

self-expression, be it in terms of “repression” (Freud) or “compensation” (Jung). When dreaming is limited to the latter definition, then the content of one’s dreams become a part of one’s therapy or treatment insofar as dreams reflect one’s personal problems. James Hillman, one of Jung’s more interesting disciples, states in *The Dream and the Underworld* that ever since Freud sought to turn dreams into obverted images of the individual psyche, dream analyses have been trying to wrench dreams out of the night world and into the realm of waking concerns. In other words, even after Freud “discovered” the unconscious he tried giving his discovery validity by artificially placing it in the only legitimate venue for intellectual endeavor—the conscious day world. Hillman observes on behalf of the modern psychological tradition:

Yet this conversion [of the dream into a day world phenomenon] has become the main effort in the therapeutic use of dreams. We turn the light on them in the morning, take them to the typewriter, bring them to the analyst, and together we read them for messages about living situations, choices, and relationships of our conscious life, its problems, feelings and thoughts.⁹⁹

The dream therefore is reduced to a way of coping with one’s private life, in which this means handling our personal problems by turning to the dream for coded messages about ourselves and nothing more. Being connected to anything beyond oneself is meaningless, hence the nihilism of which David Michael Levin critiqued earlier. This is about as far as we can get from the Dane-zaa notion of dreams. But we needed to get this far in order to put the Dane-zaa dreaming tradition into clearer relief.

With respect to our main concern for a discourse on dreaming, what the above cultural differences shed some light on is the fact that these differences are culturally determined. More specifically, what the Dane-zaa vision quest demonstrates is that insofar as it is possible for humans to control their dreaming to a certain extent, such as the hunter seeking out game trails, then if it seems to Westerners that their dreams are simply reflections of themselves it is because Westerners have conditioned themselves to dream this way.

The way out of this however is not to begin appropriating the customs and beliefs of another people’s culture. Such an endeavor will only result in the “westernizing” of a non-western culture, which is self-defeating. Ever since “Man” supplanted “God,” in David Michael Levin’s terms, western “Man” has earnestly been trying to replace “God” with alternate and often “exotic” concepts of spirituality. Jung recognized this when he noticed many Westerners turning to “Eastern religions,” be

it Buddhism, Taoism, or Hinduism, for spiritual sustenance. It was not that Asian religions were necessarily “better than” Christianity, but that Christian symbols had become banal and commonplace. The novelty of Asian icons served to re-stimulate the Western imagination. “I am convinced,” Jung claimed in light of these circumstances, “that the growing impoverishment of symbols has a meaning.”¹⁰⁰ It signified, Jung affirmed, that what Westerners have really sunk into is a morass of “apathy,” which is another word for nihilism. Western science and materialism have rendered its thoughts about the divine inert, frozen into discredited dogma and superstition.¹⁰¹

Despite “progress” in other areas of life, namely in technological innovations, western society has not outgrown its need for meaning and for transcendent symbols that arch over their world like guiding stars. So, since it no longer knows how to turn to its own traditions for wisdom, western society turns to the cultures that the western forces once colonized—and in some cases, like the Dane-zaa, still do colonize—for knowledge. “It seems to me,” Jung states to the contrary, “that it would be far better stoutly to avow our spiritual poverty, our symbol-lessness, instead of feigning a legacy to which we are not the legitimate heirs at all.”¹⁰² What Jung said then about the western fascination with Asian religions is just as valid for any interest in the Dane-zaa religion.

Where this leaves us with regard to where we can go with studying the Dane-zaa vision quest is at a point where we have to begin respecting the Dane-zaa tradition as something that belongs to another people. Further study into any aspect of Dane-zaa culture should be pursued for the sake of allowing the Dane-zaa to speak about themselves in their own terms. Just as Dane-zaa culture should be spared appropriation by well-meaning outsiders, it also should not be used to merely illustrate western dream theories. The most fitting way to learn from the Dane-zaa is to always remember that they are a unique and sovereign nation, complete with individuals who need their boundaries respected and left in tact, both politically and intellectually. In the end, we would be wise to follow Robin Ridington’s advice, when he wrote in *Swan’s People* with reference to the Dane-zaa stories he collected and translated with the gracious assistance of Dane-zaa community members:

These texts cannot be understood by us in the literal and uncritical way they evidently [sic] were and are by members of the Dane-zaa culture. Our experiences have not been theirs and we delude ourselves if we think otherwise. Their meanings must be integrated into our own mosaic with critical and careful reference back to the adaptive and historical context within which they took form. It is hoped the

reader will do these texts the justice they deserve.¹⁰³

The implication is that one possible model for learning about the Dane-zaa, or for that matter, any Indigenous culture, is in the context of an inter-faith dialogue. For it is within such a forum that people from different cultures and religions can be brought in without the pressure of being proselytized, appropriated, or explained away in another's terms. It is also where we can truly learn something about "ourselves" by listening to "others," thereby learning from different ways of being-in-the-world. What emerges is a "storytelling" paradigm in which events and their attendant values, beliefs, and knowledge, is allowed to reveal themselves in a setting where listening-as a way of opening oneself-is as important as speaking. When this happens, sharing and reciprocity become possible, which in turn creates relationships that did not exist previously, even between otherwise disparate cultures. As Ridington states in "Voice, Representation, and Dialogue":

Conversation is possible only when storyteller and listener respect and understand one another through shared knowledge and experience. It is possible only when every person can realize a place in every other person's story. It is possible only when the circle of stories includes all the relations of a world that is alive with meaning.¹⁰⁴

Notes

1. Lee Irwin, *The Dream Seekers: Native American Visionary Traditions of the Great Plains* (Norman: The University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 9.
2. Robin Ridington, *Trail to Heaven: Knowledge and Narrative in a Northern Native Community* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), xi.
3. Aristotle, *De Somniis (On Dreams)* in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 618ff.
4. René Descartes, "Discourse on Method" in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Volume I*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 126-127.
5. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 76.
6. Edmund Husserl. *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*. W. R. Childce Gibson (trans.). (London: Collier Books, 1969), 93.

7. See, for example, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science; With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, Walter Kaufmann trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1974).
8. As is well known, Heidegger dedicated his seminal work to his former teacher and colleague, Edmund Husserl, "in friendship and admiration."
9. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson trans. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1962), 28-30.
10. Edmund Husserl. "The Origin of Geometry" in *The Crisis of European Sciences*. David Carr (trans.). (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 353ff.
11. Carl Gustav Jung. "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious" in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959/1990), 50-53.
12. David Michael Levin. *The Opening of Vision: Nihilism and the Postmodern Situation*. (London: Routledge, 1988), 4.
13. Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society: Growing Up in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1963/1985), 150.
14. A complete list of Robin Ridington's publications may be found online at <http://www.retreatisland.com/rrpubs.htm>
15. More times than not, scholars tend to turn primarily to the Plains Indian vision quest for examples of this ritual, in which a premium is placed on the Lakota tradition, as exemplified by the groundbreaking work of Ruth Benedict, the Black Elk narratives, compiled by John Neihardt and Joseph Epes Brown, and more recently in *The Dream Seekers* by Lee Irwin.
16. *Trail to Heaven*, 77.
17. In all of the major works by Ridington cited in this essay the spelling is *Dunne-za*. However, I am using *Dane-zaa* at the behest of Ridington, who informed me: "I have used the spelling Dunne-za in my earlier publications but tribal linguist Billy Attachie prefers Dane-zaa, so that's what I have used in the last few years."
18. Robin Ridington, "Beaver," in *The Handbook of North American Indians*, Volume 6 (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1981), 350.
19. Pliny Earle Goddard, *The Beaver Indians*, Anthropological Papers of the Museum of Natural History, Vol X, New York, 1916, 208.
20. "Beaver," 350.
21. *The Beaver Indians*, 213.
22. See, for example, James G. E. Smith, "The Woods Cree: Anthropological Myth and Historical Reality," in *American Ethnologist*, Volume 14, Number 3 (August 1987), 434-448.
23. Robin Ridington, *Swan People: A Study of the Dunne-za Prophet*

- Dance* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1978), 29.
24. *Swan People*, 72. As a sign of the times, Ridington points out that in another version of Makenunatane's story, told by Aku, another of Ridington's "Dunne-za teachers," the legendary Dreamer is further likened to Jesus or "just like God's son" (93).
 25. The term "Prophet Dance" was actually coined by Leslie Spier, who did a landmark study on a pattern of dancing that he detected throughout the Northwest Pacific Interior, which Spier claimed eventually became the "Ghost Dance," founded by Wovoka. See Leslie Spier, *The Prophet Dance of the Northwest and Its Derivatives: The Source of the Ghost Dance* (Menasha: George Banta Publishing Company, 1935).
 26. The starvation in question, of course, was likely induced by the aforementioned westward expansion, complete with its fur trade. For further analysis of the region-wide impact inflicted by this historical trend, see Shephard Krech III, "Disease, Starvation, and Northern Athapaskan Social Organization" in *American Ethnologist*, Volume 5, Number 4 (November 1978), 710-732.
 27. *The Beaver Indians*, 213.
 28. *Swan People*, 61.
 29. Jean-Guy A Goulet, *Ways of Knowing: Experience, Knowledge, and Power among the Dene Tha* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 62. Goulet did not study the exact same group that Goddard and Ridington studied. Instead, he studied a very closely related group immediately to the east of the Dane-zaa in northern Alberta.
 30. *Swan People*, 10.
 31. *Swan People*, 13-14.
 32. *Swan People*, 2.
 33. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive Mythology: The Mythic World of the Australian and Papuan Natives* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1935/1983), 148.
 34. *Swan People*, 61. Giant animals existed, according to myth and legend, across North America. An interesting counterpart to the Dane-zaa giant moose is the Algonkian giant beaver, which itself may have been inspired by the Pleistocene giant beaver, *Castoroides ohioensis*. See Jane C. Beck, "The Giant Beaver: A Prehistoric Memory?" in *Ethnohistory*, Volume 19, Number 2 (Spring 1972), 109-122.
 35. *Swan People*, 20.
 36. *Swan People*, 61.
 37. *The Beaver Indians*, 256-257. Goddard notes that Xak"ale had to retrieve the earth from the bottom of the water because it had "dis-

appeared during a deluge from which certain people saved themselves by turning into waterbirds. The deluge was caused by the melting of the snow which accumulated during summerless years” (256n2). The next time the earth was created a waterbird named Xak”ale brought the necessary mud underneath his “finger nails,” from which the world was made. “Trees grew again on the land which was taken from the water and the earth was made again.”

38. *Swan People*, 6.
39. *Swan People*, 83.
40. *Swan People*, 20.
41. *Swan People*, 17.
42. *The Dream Seekers*, 33.
43. *Swan People*, 116.
44. *Swan People*, 116.
45. *Swan people*, 117.
46. *Swan People*, 118. See also Ridington, *Trail to Heaven*, 126-138.
47. According to Robin Ridington, in a personal e-mail to the author, “One version of the Swan story says that his helper told him to think of his name and the power it represents, i.e., get in touch with a power that is already in you.”
48. *Swan People*, 6.
49. *Swan People*, 64.
50. *Swan People*, 64.
51. *Swan People*, 65. See also Ridington, *Trail to Heaven*, 116-125.
52. *Swan People*, 7.
53. *Swan People*, 6.
54. Robin Ridington and Tonia Ridington, “The Inner Eye of Shamanism and Totemism” in *Teachings from the American Earth: Indian Religion and Philosophy*, Dennis Tedlock and Barbara Tedlock eds (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1992), 194-198. At this point, Robin Ridington has asked the author to emphasize that the ideas pertaining to “psychology and development” came from Tonia, especially the remarks about ‘sex as a destructive force.’
55. “The Inner Eye of Shamanism and Totemism,” 199.
56. Robin Ridington, *Little Bit Know Something: Stories in a Language of Anthropology* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 56.
57. *Little Bit Know Something*, 57.
58. *Little Bit Know Something*, 57-58.
59. *Little Bit Know Something*, 16.
60. *Little Bit Know Something*, 57.
61. *Little Bit Know Something*, 58.
62. “The Inner Eye of Shamanism and Totemism,” 199.

63. *Swan People*, 6.
64. See *Swan People*, 7. Ridington explains the prohibition against menstruating women this way: "Menstruation, associated with the 28-day lunar cycle, has this effect because it directs the shadow along the path of the nighttime sa [shadow] which moves "backwards" from west to east rather than "forward" from east to west."
65. *Swan People*, 7.
66. "The Inner Eye of Shamanism and Totemism," 199.
67. *Little Bit Know Something*, 59.
68. *Little Bit Know Something*, 58-59.
69. *Little Bit Know Something*, 18.
70. *Little Bit Know Something*, 59.
71. *Little Bit Know Something*, 59.
72. *Swan People*, 16.
73. *Little Bit Know Something*, 18.
74. *Little Bit Know Something*, 55.
75. *Little Bit Know Something*, 17.
76. *Little Bit Know Something*, 18.
77. *Little Bit Know Something*, 16.
78. *Swan People*, 23.
79. *Swan People*, 24.
80. *Swan People*, 25.
81. Lee Irwin. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture: The Plains Vision Quest Paradigm," *American Indian Quarterly*, Spring 1994, Volume 18, Number 2, 229. This same article would later be included as Chapter One of *The Dream Seekers*.
82. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 230.
83. See also Ridington, Introduction to *Trail to Heaven*, ix-xv.
84. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 233.
85. Carl Gustav Jung. "On the Nature of Dreams" in *Dreams*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 76.
86. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 234-235.
87. See Ridington, *Swan People*, 30-40.
88. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 235.
89. While this characterization of the Western tradition is justifiable; at the same time, we should be wary of ignoring the exceptions. Ellen Dissanayake stated in an e-mail to the author: "I like your pointing on p. [29] about the debunking and the demystifying of the West and the acceptance of mystery by Indigenous cultures. That too is a loss [in the West, along with a sense of common beliefs and symbols], although I understand that at the higher reaches of physics (the immensities of space and the structure of matter) modern physi-

- cists also acknowledge 'mystery'."
90. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 236.
 91. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 237.
 92. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 237.
 93. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 238.
 94. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 239.
 95. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 240.
 96. "Dreams, Theory, and Culture," 240.
 97. See *Swan's People*, 27-30.
 98. Ellen Dissanayake observed in a personal e-mail to the author: "I agree with Jung's statement that Western people need psychology because they no longer benefit from the religions and mythologies that bound them together. Psychology becomes another religion and mythology-as do dietary and exercise practices of the present."
 99. James Hillman. *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), 11.
 100. "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," 14.
 101. For an astute analysis of this historical phenomenon taking place, particular within British and German societies, see A. N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999).
 102. "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," 14-15.
 103. *Swan's People*, 60.
 104. Robin Ridington, "Voice, Representation, and Dialogue: The Poetics of Native American Spiritual Traditions," in *Native American Spirituality: A Critical Reader*, Lee Irwin ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 99.