

The Walrus Tale

Two sections of this 3-day and 3-night long Inuit story for long winter nights
as told by Peter Synyge (sp), shaman, in 1985 or 1986

For Peter and his people, who first told this story to their children's children's children
For Walrus, Deer, Rabbit and all the other Animal People in whose honor this story was told
Especially for Rabbit housemates, BunBun, Midnight and Dozie/Bulldozer, my most profound
teachers of how to live as part of the web of life. (No, we did not eat them, though Dozie
agreed to become Coyote and Crow came to tell me she had gone.)
For Michael, and for Ariana and her future children - my grandchildren . . . may the
7th generation benefit from this story. Ho!

And for E.M. and others wondering what to eat, to whom I've passed on this ancient wisdom.
May it illuminate the way as you see if and how eating meat therapeutically might support your
life and healing. Perhaps it can be seen as a give-away and you will come to understand in
time how you can give in return.

How I came to be a keeper of these stories:

Once upon a time, long ago, when I was married to your father, and he was still alive and on
fire for leading vision quests to the desert, he met an Eskimo man from Alaska.

Peter, like many 'old souls', was recognized in early childhood as having special gifts. He was
trained as a shaman in the Northwest and also in Siberia. Like many of his people, he had
experienced more loss, early in life, than many of us can imagine. And like many, the numbing
power of alcohol was a challenging temptation to resist.

When we knew him, he was reclaiming his connection to the land, to vision, and to the old
stories. His telling them to us, the local Novato, CA vision quest community gathered in our
living room, was a gift both to us and to his ancestors. Those 2 evenings were occasions that
I've never forgotten. Now, I give them to you.

I'd hoped to find these stories on the web because, as an acupuncturist, I often tell them to
people whose bodies may require some meat protein in order to recover. These stories, of a
hunter people who required meat to survive in a harsh environment, show that it's possible to
accept the give-away from our Animal People kin -- that it keeps us alive in the circle of life.
The stories also point to how we can give back.

Peter told us that the Walrus Story is 3 days and 3 nights long. It was told in igloos to make the
most of the winter's dark "Looks Within" time. And to impart, from one generation to the next,
the wisdom and understanding needed to survive and thrive as part of the arctic web of life.



Community of igloos. (Illustration from [Charles Francis Hall's Arctic Researches](#))

The Bone Game: How Humans Won the Top Spot on the Food Chain -- and What This Means

There was a Golden Age (though probably the Inuit didn't call it "golden", not valuing shiny yellow metal as we do) -- that magical time in the past of every culture, when "lion lies down with lamb" and no creature needs to eat another for its sustenance. Then this peaceful time came to an end and everything changed. Creator came to all the People, Plant, Animal and Human alike, to tell them the news of the coming new era. I don't recall that any explanation was given; this is just 'how it is' now.

Since no one wanted to decide who should be his/her neighbor's food, chance would determine who would eat whom. So Creator taught all Beings how to gamble; taught them all the Bone Game.

The Bone Game is still played today:

<http://www.4directions.org/resources/features/si99/instituteprod/slahal/> *The object of the game is to correctly guess where certain game bones are located. When our ancestors played the game, the winnings would include clothing, blankets, shawls, horses and buckskin. Today the stakes can be worth thousands of dollars.*

In the first Bone Game the stakes were - who would be steak. . . .

The first throw of the bones was between Plant and Animal kingdoms. Plants lost.

The second throw of the bones, among invisible People, some lost, some won.

Some Insect People won, some lost. Bird People and Lizard People won over Insect People.

But Invisible People and Insect People who need meat get to have any type of dead People. Which is a good thing, really, or dead People who couldn't be eaten by larger People would make an awful stink.

Mouse and Rabbit People lost early in the game.

Soon it came down to Killer Whale, Polar Bear, Grizzly Bear -- and Human People. It was known that Human People were extremely clever, so they were very good at remembering where the bones were. They might have even figured out how to cheat, as Human People still sometimes do.

It came to the last throw of the bones - Polar Bear People (who, as a result of being next to last, can hunt on land and in the sea) and Human People. Polar Bear missed and Human People were the last ones out -- and the top of the food chain.

Being proud and puffed up, as Human People are wont to get, they started boasting. But Creator put this to a stop very quickly, saying, "The People who won are now responsible for being the Keepers of the entire web of life. All the People whom you have beaten in the game, you are responsible for caring for and preserving them. If any of them are harmed, the whole web will weaken, and your own survival will be in peril."

From that day on, Human People who understand the web of life have recognized our responsibility for all the other People on the Earth. Though they have to live by eating other Peoples, they know to treat those Peoples with respect, for without them Human People could not live. Those Humans who forget or are disrespectful put all Peoples and the entire web in peril.

From Wikipedia: *Inuit*, if you wish to know more:

The Inuit practised a form of shamanism based on [animist](#) principles. They believed that all things had a form of spirit, including humans, and that to some extent these spirits could be influenced by a [pantheon](#) of supernatural entities that could be appeased when one required some animal or inanimate thing to act in a certain way. The *angakkuq* of a community of Inuit was not the leader, but rather a sort of healer and [psychotherapist](#), who tended wounds and offered advice, as well as invoking the spirits to assist people in their lives. His or her role was to see, interpret and exhort the subtle and unseen.

Angakkuit were not trained; they were held to be born with the ability and recognised by the community as they approached adulthood. *(I gathered from Peter that, because of the pressures of civilization, the elders rushed his education. His training began at a much younger age and he grieved that in so doing, he had lost his childhood, along with everything else)*

Inuit religion was closely tied to a system of rituals integrated into the daily life of the people. These rituals were simple but held to be necessary. According to a customary Inuit saying,

The great peril of our existence lies in the fact that our diet consists entirely of souls. By believing that all things, including animals, have souls like those of humans, any hunt that failed to show appropriate respect and customary supplication would only give the liberated spirits cause to avenge themselves.

The harshness and unpredictability of life in the Arctic ensured that Inuit lived with concern for the uncontrollable, where a streak of bad luck could destroy an entire community. To offend a spirit was to risk its interference with an already marginal existence. The Inuit understood that they had to work in harmony with supernatural powers to provide the necessities of day-to-day life.

The other story Peter told, ***The Disrespectful Hunter***, taught the young people what working in harmony means in relation to the hunt. And the importance of fully utilizing the resources offered -- given-away to them by the Animal People they hunt and eat.

First, though, a contemporary account of a Native American hunter and his relationship with the particular deer that offered itself to him.

Charlie Thom and the Deer Who Waited for Him

Northern California Native American Karuk medicine man-ceremonial leader Charles "Charlie" Thom led sweat lodges that your dad and I attended. I stopped when I became pregnant with you.

Your dad went with Charlie one day because he wanted to learn how to hunt deer.

He and Charlie sat all day up on a little ridge above a deer trail. Charlie had left his gun in the car and all day, deer passed below them. Your dad was surprised and pretty

baffled.

Finally, around 4 p.m., a deer came down the trail and it stopped. Charlie got up, walked to his car and came back with his rifle. The deer was still there.

Your dad said it was like they had an appointment. That was the deer that Charlie took because it was the one that offered itself to him.

Native Americans call this the “Give-Away”. “The give-away in varying forms is a widespread practice among Native people. It is both a physical event and a spiritual concept. . . . Through the give-away, the community is saying, “This thing of honor we do is more important than anything we might possess.” . . The ultimate give-away is the giving of oneself-- literally, the offering of oneself, for the sake of the people.”

From *The Give-Away, A Christmas Story in the Native American Tradition* by Ray Buckley, Interim Director of the Center for Native American Spirituality and Christian Study. A think-tank for Native scholars and spiritual leaders, the center helps create bridges of relationship for Native faith communities and traditional Native people in the United States and Canada. Ray spent his early years on Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. His father was Tlingit/Lakota. His mother is a native of Scotland. Ray is a traditional woodcarver and basket maker.

Peter’s second story, which, I think, he told us first. (It’s interesting that he chose our house to tell the story in. It’s the house where you were born, and it’s an 8-sided house, not a square one. Our part of the house was upstairs looking out into the branches of the trees - an octagonal tree house. I wonder if the shape of the room, half of the octagon, might have felt more like the round houses of home, of the traditional homes. . . .). It was a wonderful shape for a house, though a bit challenging to fit in much furniture.

The Disrespectful Hunter

Once there was an arrogant young hunter. He was very strong and very capable. He had an easy time taking animals for food. Because he was young and strong and quick and clever, he and his kin never lacked for meat. He enjoyed such an abundance that he began to take shortcuts and skip the reverent steps the rest of the people took to honor and utilize all parts of each creature than offered itself to them in the great give-away. He forgot that they were Animal People who gave themselves freely to him that he and his family might live. He started seeing them as “things”, as commodities. He forgot his place in the web of life. He felt entitled.

As the elders taught in the Walrus Story during the long nights of winter, each part of the Animal Person that is respected and used will end up on the other side of life (in that land white people misunderstood as the “Happy Hunting Ground”) to rejoin the spirit body of that being who gave itself away.

On the other side, Animal People were finding themselves with many missing parts. Caribou without all their tendons, bear with only fur and claws, a few muscles and their livers, but nothing else; walrus with tusks and blubber, but no hide. Soon the incomplete spirit Animal People had determined what they all had in common; they had given themselves away to the same disrespectful young hunter.

So they stopped. From the moment of that realization on, no living Animal People would go anywhere near the young hunter. Where he had assumed his abundant catch was the result of his own prowess, he soon learned that his good fortune had been just that - fortune bestowed by the generosity of his fellow creatures.

He 'caught' nothing. His family went hungry. He went hungry. It became harder to go out to hunt because he was growing weaker. The other people in the village had been observing his arrogant and wasteful behavior; it had worried them. One fool's disregard could turn the Animal Spirit world against all the people. They knew they couldn't help him because if they did, he would never learn the lessons he had forgotten from the long nights of sacred story.

So they waited. The Animal People in the spirit world waited. The Animal People in the sea, on the ice and the tundra waited.

The young man grew weaker. His children stopped crying for hunger. His wife was gaunt and worn. Finally, he woke up. The voices of the ancestors whispered the ancient stories of how the Human People have an obligation to preserve the web of life, have stewardship. He remembered that he had carelessly thrown out many parts of the Animal People and he understood that he had sent many maimed and incomplete beings to limp and stumble blindly through the spirit world.

The shaman, *angakkuq*, would know how he could make amends, how he could mend what the Lakota people call 'the Sacred Hoop'. Once he understood that he needed to ask for help, apologize and rectify what he could, the whole village would join the ceremony. Together they would help him communicate his change of heart, vouch for his renewed intention to honor his place in the web and the blessings of the give-away from his benefactors, the Animal People. They had honored their part in the web; he would now honor his.

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When I notice that my particular body does better with small amounts of meat, and especially strong broths made from bones, tendons and ligaments, and sometimes fresh fish, and especially fish head stew, I am operating according to the old Nourishing Traditions of China and many other cultures.

While I advocate therapeutic use of meat at times, I still agree with Michael Pollan's three principles: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants."

When considering what if and what meat to eat and how much, we can ask if our choices meet the Aldo Leopold test: Does it make us better citizens of the biotic community? Does it get us to do things that support the perpetuation of the biota, rather than its destruction?

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TQPN1O03z8I> Michale Pollan's TED talk at 5:55

The Inuit would appreciate Aldo. And Michael Pollan's statement, "looking at the world from other species' points of view is a cure for the disease of human self-importance."

"If you begin to take account of other species, take account of the soil . . . we can take the food we need from the earth and heal the earth in the process. This is a way to reanimate the world."

And, thank you, Peter. Wherever you are, I hope you are well and whole.