

**“This is What Love Looks Like”\***

**by**

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(\*The title is a quotation from the statement given by Tim DeChristopher to the judge who would sentence him to two years in federal prison.)

Ethics, as you know, is a branch – a type – of philosophy that delineates or systematizes right and wrong within a particular context and construction of the world. Environmental ethics, then, is how we philosophize, and thus create a system of right and wrong, with regard to how we live and behave toward the environment.

The key to construction of our environmental ethics lies in our language. That phrase, “toward the environment” places us immediately within the realm of a particular ethical system – that of the amalgamated concept of history and geography we call the West. In the Western construct of ‘environment’, ‘environment’ or ‘nature’ is separated from people. People are *other* than nature, and more specifically, above nature in a hierarchy resting on chain of being that places a monotheistic god on top of (white) men, then women, then cultural others, then animals – with the cultural others often being described in “animalistic” terms.

That word “animal” is another powerful indicator of Western environmental ethics. In the Indigenous – American Indian - communities I had the opportunity to become familiar with, their languages have no words for “nature” *or* “animal.” There are translations for “human beings” with *humans* being one of many beings. In these American Indian environmental ethics, this construction is understood as “kinship.” In this ethical construction, the “environment” becomes a social sphere, the biosphere, in which every being is in a social relationship. These

social relationships determine behavior towards other than human beings, which can be trees, fish, bear, stones, or clouds.

When Westerners first encountered Native kinship philosophies, they defined them as polytheistic or animistic, because these Westerners could only define Native philosophies from within their own ethical system, in which Native people were just as separate from the rest of the world as Westerners are. Indigenous peoples, they believed, *worshipped many gods*, or they *worshipped animals*. As I have come to understand it, however, within this kinship philosophy there is not *worship*. There is *thanks or gratitude*. And there is *reciprocity*.

What this means is American Indian ceremonies are constructed to offer thanks for what the biosphere gives to human beings for life, and they are constructed to exchange respect or some other form of effort or sacrifice in reciprocity for what all the beings of the biosphere offer to humans.

Western hierarchal ethics put humans in charge of the rest of nature and are derived from a philosophy that rests on notions of superiority. American Indian kinship ethics put humans in horizontal relations with the rest of biosphere and are derived from a philosophy based on humility and the contingency of human life. Contingency means, we are, in other words, *dependent* on the biosphere that supports us. This is kinship – the structure of healthy families is one of interdependency, communal exchange and reciprocity. Environmental kinship ethics mean that the family ethic is extended to include the entire biosphere. If you would not disrespect your mother because she has provided life and continues to support and love you, then you would not disrespect a ‘grandmother tree,’ for example, or a ‘father bear.’

I’m just going to take one moment here before I continue, to address a couple of things that always come up when I’m speaking about American Indian environmental ethics. The first

is the negative perception of the stereotype of the “ecological Indian.” People say to me when I talk about kinship ethics, that they know Indians who are making a ton from gambling, cigarettes, or fossil fuels, so their ethics are not better than ours. But, this is a complete misconception. I know many people who claim to be Christians who still covet their neighbor’s wife or who do not turn the other cheek; the behavior of these particular Christians does invalidate worthwhile Christian ethical aspirations. In addition, these Indians may be ethnically Indians, but they are embracing a Western capitalist philosophy, not a kinship philosophy.

The other argument I hear is that Indians are romanticized and nostalgically envisioned as utopian communities who had no problems until white folks showed up. While it is true that Indians are romanticized – mostly by white folks – this does not preclude the validity of kinship ethics. Indigenous people on this continent had all the problems humans have, but really coming to understand these cultures means admitting that in many cases – not all – but many, their understanding of their place in the biosphere created a social vision that is healthier and causes less damage than the Western social vision of hierarchy, separation, and accumulation. It is my perspective that the energy that goes into denying that American Indian kinship philosophies have something to offer non-Indian communities comes from fear, laziness, lack of imagination, and downright delusion. The fear is fear of change and the laziness is the lack of energy and will to put more effort into transforming our own lives and developing creative ways to transform our current ethical systems. People choose many forms of delusion and distraction to avoid deep and *self-critical* examination or to avoid considering their particular level of responsibility for the conditions in which we live.

Having voiced those common arguments, let me continue to define kinship and to talk about what this social vision has to offer us. To do this, I want to turn to Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road*, an incredibly powerful novel – or epic poem as some call it – that reveals itself more and more upon each successive read. I choose *The Road* now because it is a deep and reflective examination of Western culture and philosophical tradition. I cannot do this novel justice in this short time, but I want to address some of the major ideas about environmental ethics it has to offer.

The premise of *The Road* is simple. There has been a nuclear holocaust. The world is being blanketed in the ash of a nuclear winter and most life has been burned, blackened, and destroyed. In this world, the main characters, a father and son, whose names we never learn, need to walk from north to south – to a warmer climate. The father believes they cannot survive another cold season where they are and suspects that in the south there might be other communities of human beings with whom they can live; he knows that he and his son cannot survive this harsh world much longer alone. *The Road* uses the classic Western literary trope of the journey to interrogate Western environmental ethics and to ask us – the readers – to look deeply at the world we have wrought. The boy, significantly, was born the night of the holocaust, as the mother and father watched cities burn in the distance. He has never known any world but the dark one. The mother, after years of trying to survive a decimated earth, takes her own life. She cannot face what the father and son are now facing on the road south. In addition to the hardships of darkness, weather and starvation, the world of the road is inhabited by what the boy calls “the bad guys” – these are human beings who have become cannibals. They roam in groups with weapons and feed on the flesh of other survivors, killing them slowly to consume

parts of their bodies at a time. It is a grotesque world, a world that has been stripped of most life and all illusion.

In one particular scene in the novel, the father and son hide while a rag tag group of cannibals parade past them on the road. The cannibals are in a very particular order: Men with weapons first who had designated themselves an army with red pieces of material tied around their necks – here I quote, “Behind them came wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites ill clothed against the cold and fitted in dog collars and yoked each to each.”

The symbolism of this parade is elegant and simple. And it is, to anyone who would look with clear eyes, the mirror of our world. The accumulation of wealth is prioritized and acquired by any means necessary. The physically strong, whether in body or through weapons, use that strength to take the available wealth and control the weaker, which they can only do through force and enslavement. Women are chattel and produce babies that will be food, and the men take bodily pleasure from children in a world totally bereft of love. An important key here is the action of cannibalism itself. All of “nature’s” resources are decimated through a nuclear holocaust that, though, the cause is never revealed, is the natural extension of a world at war over continually shrinking resources. As the resource pool becomes smaller and smaller, voracious humans need to acquire resources from harder places – offshore drilling, mountaintop removal, fracking, uranium mining and nuclear power – and from closer and closer to backyards that have been previously off limits. Wars result. The circle grows smaller and smaller as we cannibalize the very earth that supports our life. McCarthy shrinks that circle, again to its logical conclusion, with humans eating themselves to survive, after they have destroyed everything else. It’s

inevitable that at some point when starving unhealthy women can no longer reproduce a food supply, the conquerors would turn on each other until there is only a last cannibal standing who must turn to eating his own feet.

But, and here is the genius of the book, the darkness and the ugliness reveal tremendous beauty. The persistent question of the boy to his father is one of ethical consideration. The boy is determined that he and his father, surrounded by atrocity, NOT succumb to it, either by suicide or by becoming one of the bad guys. In their travels on the road, the boy – who has known nothing but ugliness from this the world – intuitively understands empathy and is supported by the choice his father and mother made to love and protect him, and then his father makes, to try to help him survive and reach a community with values that support life. On the road, it is the boy, who persistently pleads with his father not to give in to anger and fear. But – and this is equally important – his innocence is also balanced by the father's pragmatism: there must be mercy and generosity, but there also must be the willingness to take a stand and self-defend against a culture of death.

The boy and the father define themselves as *carriers of the fire*; fire also a potent symbol, conveying both the destructiveness of the nuclear holocaust and the possibility for light and life. The key here is that the *choice* for what fire will mean is theirs. In Western tradition, when Prometheus stole fire from the gods, man became god, believing that fire opened to him the possibility not only to know and understand, but to also *master* everything around him. Man believing himself to be god, lost all humility, and created a weapon upon whose power he has become drunk and unseeing of the likelihood of the self-destruction that always accompanies such hubris.

But, even in these most dark of days, the boy and the father travel the horribly difficult road still with the ability to make choices about what how they will behave toward the world and people around them. When they happen upon the bomb shelter that provides them the best nourishment they've had in months, the boy insists they give thanks to those who came before and assured them this feast, when they confront the thief who stole everything they had accumulated to survive, the boy convinces the father not to kill him, but simply to leave him behind on the road. They share what they have with an old man straggler – a Jesus like figure – to whom they give food and warmth from the fire and from whom they are offered the wisdom of humility and reciprocity in return, in the form of a dialogue that critiques the ethics that make man a destructive god mastering, exploiting, and destroying the rest of the biosphere.

The idea of choice in the novel highlights another central tenet of our Western ethical paradigm, one that has evolved from notions of original sin combined with an Enlightenment obsession with the “natural:” The idea of *human nature* which states that humans beings are naturally bad and must learn or be acted upon by ceremony, social mores, or some other external moral authority to understand how to behave ethically. The boy's goodness speaks to a different truth entirely. Born into a world of evil, the love that he knows from his parents nurture what is *natural* to him, and he IS good. If it is goodness that is natural, then we ARE all good – it's greed and self-centeredness that, through ceremony, social mores, and authority, we *learn* to embrace.

Another book I'm reading now, *Beautiful Souls*, by Eyal Press, speaks to the possibility of the truth of this. *Beautiful Souls* is a book about whistle blowers – people who stand apart and risk personal harm to aid or benefit others. Press's thesis, and he shows this through scientific and sociological studies, as well as through the anecdotal stories of the people whose

actions he highlights, is that first, whistle blowers are not heroic, they are like all of us, and their instinctive goodness is realized in a moment of deep decision. And second, this moral capacity for selflessness exists in us and *it* is human nature; we learn to work against it because of the ethical system with which we've saddled ourselves.

On the final page of *The Road*, McCarthy writes,

“Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torisional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.”

For me these closing words speak to the depths of the destruction of the choices we have made. We read the maps of the ancient creatures who came before us, and we followed them without humility, in search of mastery and control, asking only what they could provide to us, not what we owed to them for our lives and sustenance. We have disrespected the Promethean fire that brought us light and warmth. We disrespected the mystery of the fish that feeds us and of the water that keeps that fish alive. We believed we were gods using the fire to master the world; but in the end, because we truly are as the American Indians believe, kin with and in the world, we have turned the fire upon ourselves.

But, like the father and son and the beautiful souls whose stories are told by Eyal Press, there have always been and are now those of us who choose other and are willing to consider learning a different way; espousing different ethics. Here, locally, there are those who say no to fracking on their land at the cost of great wealth for themselves, because the land and their

neighbors' water are more important than whatever the wealth accumulation from natural gas would provide in their lives. There are people like Tim DeChristopher, from whose words I borrowed the title to this talk. Tim DeChristopher, for those of you who don't know, is an eco-activist now spending two years in a federal prison for, in the government's terms, two felonies, "making a false statement in public auction" and "violating laws on oil and gas leasing." In the waning days of the Bush Administration, the Department of Interior held an auction of public lands, later found to be illegal by the Obama administration. The auction, to be held in Utah, was announced with no public notice for a Friday afternoon in an attempt to get by environmentalists and the press. Tim DeChristopher and some others got wind of the auction, but had little time to organize any actions. He headed to the auction himself without a plan, but sure he would disrupt the proceedings somehow. What he ended up doing was posing as a bidder and buying acres and acres of public lands to keep them from being sold off to oil and gas corporations. Though, once Obama came in, the sold leases were vacated and though public support raised the money that Tim had bid on the lands, he was still found guilty of criminal acts. Perhaps, another great climate activist, Bill McKibben says it best:

"As climate crime continues, who are we sending to jail? Tim DeChristopher? Let's consider for a moment the targets the federal government chooses to make an example of. So far, no bankers have been charged, despite the unmitigated greed that nearly brought the world economy down. No coal or oil execs have been charged, despite fouling the entire atmosphere and putting civilization as we know it at risk. But engage in creative protest that mildly disrupts the efficient sell-off of our landscape to oil and gas barons? As Tim DeChristopher found out that'll get you not just a week in court, but potentially a long stretch in the pen."

We are at a defining moment in human existence, one that calls all of us to reflect deeply

on the ethical system in which we find ourselves. Within this particular system which values material accumulation and sees the earth, in the words of one of the first explorers to land on the shores of North America, as “a mart for merchants” an ethic of “environmentalism” has translated into an ethos of “saving.” We “preserve” a separated nature in national parks, which we can go to, and we “conserve” what *resources* we can so they are there, at least minimally, for our *use* in the future. But, without a paradigm shift, that is without a shift in our ethical philosophy, preservation and conservation can only ever be fingers in the dam. Just change administrations and what was protected wilderness land last year is this year opened to mining for uranium; what was once a protected watershed that provides clean drinking water for millions, with just a small shift in the political and corporate winds, becomes the next site for industrial gas drilling.

But there are still choices. What Indigenous kinship philosophies have opened up for me is the possibility of this paradigm shift in the language of connection. There is not us and nature – we *are* nature – there are not resources for us to exploit or protect – but kin for us to respect. There is no easy road to transformation. To return again to Cormac McCarthy’s poignant novel, the road the on which the father and son had to journey elevated almost every choice they had to make to an issue of life and death – or maybe more accurately life over death. Just think about how difficult every choice would be in our own – seemingly (relatively) easy lives, if we considered all their implications. I typed this talk on an Apple computer, probably made in an Apple factory where Chinese workers are being killed or killing themselves because of the conditions there. I try to buy fair trade and local, but I can’t always. Everyday day we make or are forced into decisions that we know consciously or unconsciously are hurting the biosphere and disrespecting our kin – human and otherwise. Ethical consistency – even for those of us

who choose it - is too often made virtually impossible within a system that needs to lead us away from seriously reflecting on our connection to the earth.

Susan Griffin, a leading ecofeminist writer, peace activist, and poet, writes that we need to stop deluding ourselves, to stop defending this civilization that has shaped our minds and which is now destroying the earth. I listen to the language of large extractive corporations, that can, in a society such as ours, in the face of mountains of contrary evidence, still convince large numbers of people nuclear power or off shore drilling in the Arctic are “safe,” that there is no climate change, that pumping millions of gallons of high pressure water laced with chemicals below the earth to release a highly flammable gas will have no effect on the ground water. These narratives provide the comfort we need to continue along – to conserve and preserve over here while we poison and pollute over there.

Indeed ethical transformation is needed, and there are ethical paradigms, Indigenous kinship philosophies among them, that offer us a social vision to which we can aspire. In the Iroquois creation story, a pregnant Sky Woman who is pushed through a hole in the sky, is caught by sea birds as she falls and lain gently on the back of a turtle in the middle of a vast sea. The water animals come together to try to help Sky Woman. Beaver dives deep to the bottom of the sea and comes up with the dirt that is used to expand the back of the turtle to make the land upon which Sky Woman can stand and upon which she eventually plants corn. Deer then approaches to eat the corn and offers his life to Sky Woman to become her food and clothing, so the survival of Sky Woman on earth, the place the Iroquois call Turtle Island, is dependent on the gifts provided to her by her fellow beings. Sky Woman eventually gives birth to twins – two brothers – one who honors his mother and the earth and one who is self centered and eager for fame and for power and wealth. When the good brother fashions humans, the bad brother

continually tries to mislead them, to tempt them to selfishness and greed. And humans are often misled. But in Iroquois cosmology, there is always a path back, a road to travel that returns us to the right way if we are willing to take it, and if we meet the challenges it requires. The key to the story is that the right road is in reality the only road that means long life; the bad brother's road eventually but inevitably always means death.

I'll draw towards my close with the words of a close friend of mine - a Navajo man who has worked for the Native American Rights Fund for the better part of his life, fighting the US government in the courts for the rights of American Indians. He has seen much stolen from his own life and from the life of his people. But, he says always, "This is temporary...it's the bad road, and it will end badly ... but the good road is always there and can never be stolen." He believes we'll return to it, and he never lets that hope be taken from him.

Finally, I will end with the words of Tim DeChristopher to the judge that sentenced him to two years of his life in prison for stopping the destruction of acres of public lands. I think to honor his sacrifice is for us here both relevant and appropriate:

"Alienation is perhaps the most effective tool of control in America, and every reminder of our real connectedness weakens that tool . . . At this point of unimaginable threats on the horizon, this is what hope looks like. In these times of a morally bankrupt government that has sold out its principles, this is what patriotism looks like. With countless lives on the line, this is what love looks like, and it will only grow. . ."

