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What They Have That We Lack
A tribute to the Native Americans via Joseph Epes Brown

Huston Smith

My title derives from the justly famous tribute to the Native Americans by John Collier, one time United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs, which begins, "They had what the world has lost. . . ." The losses that Collier mentions are "reverence and passion for human personality, and for the earth and its web of life." Accepting them as genuine losses, I shall build on them to target three other losses our civilization has suffered. We are less clear in our values, which is to say less sure as to what is important in life. We are less able to see the infinite in the finite, the transcendent in the immanent. And we have lost our way metaphysically. Because my meditation on these three impoverishments is offered as a tribute to Joseph Brown, I shall begin with the story of how we met, for the circumstances were so bizarre as to suggest that more than chance was at work.

The year was 1970 and my wife and I were passing through Stockholm where the first bean-bag chair we had seen caught our eyes and we bought it. On our way back to our hotel, swaying from a strap in a crowded subway, I felt foolish carrying our shapeless purchase over my shoulder like Santa's pack, and was remarking to my wife that I was glad we were abroad and incognito when a face emerged from the crowd and ventured, softly, "Would you be Huston Smith?" It was Joseph Brown who had recognized me from my filmed lectures on "The Religions of Man" which he had showed to his classes. Things moved rapidly, and before we parted we had accepted Joseph and his wife Eleanita's invitation to have supper with them the following day, the last before our flight left Sweden.

It was an unforgettable evening. The Browns were in Stockholm for Joseph to complete his doctoral dissertation under Ake Hultkrantz, the world's foremost authority on the Native Americans, and their apartment walls were covered with larger-than-life photographs of archetypal Indian faces. What was remarkable, though, was how rapidly our conversation plunged to things that matter most. When they learned that our next stop was to be London, Joseph directed me to

Martin Lings of the British Museum who proved to be an important link to the Traditionalist outlook of René Guénon, A. K. Coomaraswamy, and Frithjof Schuon that was beginning to impress me as true. And on the strength of the friendship that was forged that evening, Joseph became my teacher in showing me the enduring importance of the Native Americans and other primal peoples in the religious odyssey of humankind.

From the many things I have learned from those people, I turn now to the first of the three virtues I see them as having retained, and we let partially slip. I say partially because I do not want to romanticize or traffic in disjunctions. Trade-offs are involved at every point.

1. Knowing What is Important

I am not an anthropologist, and as my professional schooling occurred before mid-century, I was taught to think that myths are childish in comparison with systematically articulated metaphysics, and that "primitive" religions—the adjective explicitly intended to be pejorative—were and remain inferior to the historical ones that command written texts and a cumulative tradition. Meeting Joseph Brown rescued me from those prejudices. That shortly after meeting him I moved from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to Syracuse University solidified the change in my thinking, for I then found myself within five miles of the Iroquois Long House. It was not without amazement that I came to know the residents of the Onondaga Reservation—Chief Shenandoah, Audrey Shenandoah and Oren Lyons among them. Reading Joseph Brown's writings paralleled my visits to their reservation, and together the two shattered mental stockades, permitting new insights to erupt.

The insight that concerns me in this first section of my remarks is the loss that writing inflicts. Before I met Joseph, A. K. Coomaraswamy's *The Bugbear of Literacy* had already shown me that education cannot be equated with book-learning;[1] the great civilizations of the past were not dependent on the ability to read and write. Craftsmen—the builders of temples, mosques and churches; the sculptors of Konorak and of Chartres—were not literate, and oral tradition carried poetry and sacred knowledge for millennia before books appeared. Coomaraswamy also brought out the toll writing takes on our memories. Literate peoples grow lax in recall; they do not require much from

[1] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy* (Pates Manor, Bedfont, Middlessex, England: Perennial Books Ltd., 1949/1979).

their memories, for books and manuals are at hand to fill in the blanks. Lacking those resources, unlettered peoples make libraries of their minds. Their memories are legendary.

As I say, those two validations of orality—both memory and learning flourish in its precincts—were in place before I met Joseph Brown; but it was not until I came to the Native Americans through him that I realized that I needed to add a chapter on the primal religions to *The Religions of Man*, now titled *The World's Religions*.[2] It was while writing that chapter that it dawned on me that orality (which I shall use here to mean exclusive orality; speech which is not supplemented by writing) carries with it another blessing that is, if anything, more important than having a rich memory. Functioning something like a gyroscope, orality keeps life on keel by insuring that priorities and proportionalities are not lost sight of. Somewhere in his writings Frithjof Schuon defines intelligence exactly this way, as the sense of priorities and proportionalities. By this definition, primal peoples can be ignorant of many things, but they are rarely stupid.

Imagine a tribe, gathered around its campfire at the close of the day. Everything that its ancestors learned arduously through trial and error, from which herbs heal to stirring legends that give meaning and orientation to their lives, is preserved in their collective memory, and there only. It stands to reason that trivia would not long survive in that confine, for it would preempt space that was needed for the things that needed to be remembered.

Libraries lack this winnowing device. Natural selection, the survival of the fittest, doesn't enter its workings, for space permits virtually everything to survive, important or not. Where a page is a page, a book a book, the issue of quality scarcely arises.

To personalize this point: I happen to enjoy the services of one of the great library systems in the world, that of the University of California. Thinking back to the guided tour that brought me into its orbit, I find that I still remember the statement with which the leader of the tour welcomed us. "When you enter this library looking for a book," she said, "think: it's here. It may take us a while to locate it, but it's here." As I learned how the immense holdings of the local library locked into comparable libraries around the world through Internet and inter-library loan, I found myself believing her.

I do not discount the help and pleasure that accrued from having recorded human history at one's fingertips. It is the trade-off it entails

[2] Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (Harper San Francisco, 1991).

that the Native Americans have taught me. When I step out of the elevator onto a floor of my university's library, I am greeted in effect by arrows directing me to its numerous corridors: history here, chemistry there, a bewildering array. There is no arrow that reads "importance," much less "wisdom." It's more like, "Good luck, folks. From here on out you're on your own."

The burden this places on individuals is enormous; whether it is supportable remains to be seen. T. S. Eliot put my point simply.

> Where is the knowledge that is lost in information?
> Where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge?

We are inundated by information today, to the point of drowning in it. When the British Broadcasting Company first went on the air, the newsroom policy on a no-news day was simply to say there was no news and play classical music. Is there a newsroom in the world that has the restraint to honor such a policy today? Alvin Toffler warned us in *Future Shock* a quarter century ago that information overload was already "pressing the limits of human adaptability," but all he offered by way of counsel was that we develop a consciousness that is capable of adapting to changes that look like they are going to keep on accelerating.[3]

That advice is no match for the problem we face, and it may take a breakdown of sorts to drive that fact home. More than any other breakthrough, it is the computer that has increased the quantity of information that can be saved, retrieved, and transferred. It was assumed that this increase would raise our industrial efficiency, but the country is still waiting for the big payoff that electronic boosters keep promising. Many experts are now concluding that for all their power, computers may be costing U. S. companies tens of billions of dollars a year in downtime, maintenance and training costs, useless game playing, and—the relevant point here—information overload. As Yale economist and Nobel laureate Robert Solow has noted, "You can see the computer age everywhere but in the productivity statistics."[4] From 1950 to 1973, when computers were still a novelty, the U. S. economy enjoyed one of the greatest economic booms in its history. Since then, as computers have taken over nearly every desk in

[3] Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970).

[4] The San Francisco Chronicle, July 1995, p. 1.

the land, the rate of productivity growth has mysteriously plummeted. Many experts believe that computers may be more the cause of the problem than the key to its solution.

If information overload can impair industrial efficiency, what about life efficiency; which is to say, the ability to avoid squandering life on frivolous ends? The great orienting myths that primal peoples rehearse endlessly, and carry constantly in their hearts and heads, protect them from this danger.

Something that Claude Levi-Strauss observed relates to this. For an anthropologist, he took surprisingly little interest in what myths meant to the peoples who lived by them. Deeming science the noblest human pursuit, he wanted to parallel what Noam Chomsky was doing in linguistics and put anthropology, too, in the service of science's efforts to discover how the mind works. Artificial intelligence, he believed, was on the right track in assuming that the mind works like a computer—through binary, on-off flip-flops—and Levi-Strauss saw himself as corroborating that hypothesis by showing (as in *The Raw and the Cooked*) that myths proceed binarily, from a forked starting point. In the course of his investigations, though, he picked up something that is important. The primitive mind, he reported, assumes that you do not understand anything unless you understand everything, whereas science proceeds in the opposite manner, from part to whole.[5] Levi-Strauss considered the scientific approach superior to the mythic,[6] whereas I find them complementary and equally important.

[5] With holists ranged against atomists, current epistemologists are vigorously disputing which of these assumptions best captures the way meaning works. The most uncompromising advocate of atomism is M. I. T.'s Jerry Fodor, for whom holism has become what Carthage must have been to Cato, as a reviewer of his two books attacking the position remarks (see *The Journal of Philosophy*, X/1995, pp. 330-44). When we couple to this the fact that Fodor is uncompromising in insisting that psychology is an empirical science, we find this thus illustrating Levi-Strauss' point that science (which progresses through discrete factual discoveries) is the principal sponsor of the atomistic approach to knowledge.

[6] "The totalitarian ambition of the savage mind . . . does not succeed. We are able, through scientific thinking, to achieve mastery over nature . . . while myth is unsuccessful in giving man more material power over the environment. It gives man the illusion that he can understand the universe, [but] it is, of course, only an illusion" (Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, p. 17). That the foremost anthropologist of recent times acknowledges that "mastery over nature" and "material power over the environment" are his highest values, confirms the claim of this first section of this essay. We are confused as to what is important.

2. Symbolic Minds

The item I wrote just before turning to this tribute to Joseph chanced to be the Foreword to a collection of excerpts from Emanuel Swedenborg's writings,[7] and as I was already thinking ahead to the present piece when I came upon this passage, I was struck by its relevance to this second point I shall be making.

> I have learned from heaven [Swedenborg wrote] that the earliest people had direct revelation, because their more inward reaches were turned toward heaven; and that, as a result, there was a union of the Lord with the human race then. But as time passed, there was not this kind of direct revelation but an indirect one through correspondences. All their divine worship consisted of correspondences, so we call the churches of that era representative churches. They knew what correspondence was and what representation was, and they knew that everything on earth was responsive to spiritual things in heaven and portrayed them. So natural things served as means of thinking spiritually. . . . The earliest people saw some image of and reference to the Lord's kingdom in absolutely everything—in mountains, hills, plains, and valleys, in gardens, groves, and forests, in rivers and lakes, in fields, and crops, in all kinds of trees, in all kinds of animals as well, in the luminaries of the sky.

Swedenborg proceeds to confirm this way of seeing the world by citing his own visionary experience.

> I have been taught by an abundance of experience that there is not the slightest thing in the natural world, in its three kingdoms, that does not portray something in the spiritual world or that does not have something there to which it is responsive.

From there he continues:

> After knowledge of correspondences and representations had been forgotten, the Word was written, in which all the words and their meanings were correspondences, containing in this way a spiritual or inner meaning.[8]

[7] George F. Dole, *A Thoughtful Soul* (West Chester, PA: Swedenborg Foundation, 1995).

[8] Emanuel Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, p. 306; Arcana Coelestia 1 2722:5.

Paraphrasing these three stages into which Swedenborg divides religion: In the first stage, nature is transparent to the divine and is seen as divine without remainder, so no divinity apart from it is sought. Presumably this first stage is something like the natural religion of early childhood, when (as a poet has said) "heaven and a splendorous earth were one," before the child's clear eye is clouded over by ideas and opinions, preconceptions and abstractions. In the second stage, nature loses this transparency, but remains (we might say) translucent. Divinity continues to shine through mountains, groves, and springs, but those objects now *ex-ist*—"stand out apart from" their source—in having acquired a certain objectivity of their own. This distancing obscures their connectedness with their divine source, and that connectedness needs to be recovered through symbolism: Swedenborg's representations and correspondences. If we take light as our example, at some level of their awareness, people in this second stage recognize that its power to enable us to discern things by seeing them is a prolongation of the divine intelligence. Water tokens the divine purity and nurturance, flowers its beauty, etc., etc., world without end.

The first stage requires no mental processing. In the second, some mediation is needed, but correspondences (which serve that function) are so obvious that little articulation is called for. In Swedenborg's third stage, this ceases to be the case. Opaqueness—the fall into matter—has proceeded to the point where language and thought are needed to state explicitly what earlier intelligence took for granted: that rocks and trees are not self-subsistent in the way optics by itself presents them. It now needs to be said that nature carries the signature of the divine—not only nature as a whole, but its parts, each of which betokens one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of Allah, as Muslims put the matter.

Generalizing from this threefold division, it seems appropriate to credit primal peoples with prolonging the second period into our own more materialistic age. To invoke Coomaraswamy again, when he came to the United States to become director of the Oriental Section of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, the traditional lore of the American Indians deeply moved him, for he saw in these much persecuted remnants of the indigenous population of the continent an organic intelligence that was still able to read the open book of nature as others read their written scriptures. His South Asian heritage led him to associate the Native Americans' metaphysical insight—their capacity to see the world and everything within it as a living revelation of the Great Spirit—with Vedic times in his own heritage. Without exag-

geration, he felt, he could speak of their wisdom as belonging to an earlier *yuga* which somehow had persisted into these later times, an extension that carried a message of hope to a forgetful and much tormented world. The recognition that every plant, every insect, stones even, participate in the *dharma* and need to be treated, not as spoils for human appetites, but as companions in terms both of origin and ultimate destiny, conditioned all the Native Americans' ideas of what is right and wrong. What a happier world this would be, Coomaraswamy concluded, if such ideas had not been marginalized.[9]

3. Metaphysical Accuracy

"Strictly speaking," Frithjof Schuon has written, "there is but one sole philosophy, the *Sophia Perennis;* it is also—envisaged in its integrality—the only religion."[10] Philosophy here refers to descriptions of reality's deep structure, among which (Truth being one) there can be only one accurate account, which other accounts (insofar as they are accurate) embellish but do not contradict. As for religion, it refers to the methods for conforming one's life to reality's structure. Ken Wilber has recently said that belief in the *Sophia Perennis* (or Great Chain of Being as he calls it) has been "so overwhelmingly widespread that it is either the single greatest intellectual error ever to appear in human history, or it is the most accurate reflection of reality yet to appear."[11]

Modernity has departed from this sole true philosophy, and the difference between it and the science-oriented alternative with which modernity replaced it can be stated simply. Whereas traditional philosophy proceeds from the premise that the less derives from the more—from what is greater than itself in every respect, primacy, power, and worth being foremost—modernity sees the more (as it climaxes qualitatively in the human species) as deriving from the less.

I have already credited Joseph Brown for introducing me to the Native Americans and the distinctive outlook of primal peoples generally, and here (in this closing section of my tribute to him) I can credit

[9] A more complete account of Coomaraswamy's thoughts on this matter is given in Marco Pallis, "A Fateful Meeting of Minds: A. K. Coomaraswamy and René Guénon," *Studies in Comparative Religion*, Summer-Autumn, 1978.

[10] Frithjof Schuon, *The Transfiguration of Man* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1995), p. 10.

[11] Ken Wilber, "The Great Chain of Being," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Summer 1993), p. 53.

him more pointedly. In one way or another many anthropologists have dealt with the two preceding resources of primal peoples, but Brown stands alone in detailing, in his important study, *The Sacred Pipe,* the way in which Native American religion embodies the *Sophia Perennis* in its own distinctive idiom.[12]

In briefest capsule: The Native American outlook conforms to the Great Chain of Being in seeing the whole of things as an ontological hierarchy in which lesser things derive in graded sequence from the Great Spirit, which is its version of the *ens perfectissimum*. In *Creek Mary's Blood*, the sequel to her *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, Dee Brown gives us a glimpse of the initial cut that the Native Americans enter—that between the sacred and the profane—when she writes:

> In those days there were always two levels in the world of the Cheyennes. We did not consider the world of hunting or hide curing or arrow or moccasin making, or any of those things as the real world. The real world was a place of magic, of dreams wherein we became spirits.[13]

Subsequent divisions in the real and sacred world vary according to which tribe we are speaking of. The Tewa, for instance, have five sacred realms, whereas the Plains Indians that Brown worked with most will content themselves with three. When we add the everyday world to these three, we come up with the minimum number of "links" in the Great Chain of Being that peoples have found it necessary to posit. In *Forgotten Truth*, I call them the terrestrial, the intermediate, the celestial, and the infinite;[14] and in *The Sacred Pipe*, Brown tells us how the Oglala Sioux describe them.[15] Mounting from the mundane into the sacred world, the Oglala find its lowest echelon populated by myriad spirits, some good, some bad. Human beings can access this realm from time to time, as Dee Brown points out, but its natural population consists of discarnates of various stripes. Shamans enter into working relationships with those spirits, enlisting good ones as allies to do battle with those of evil intent.

Above this spirit world, which is something of a melange, stands the Great Spirit, *Wakan-Tanka,* who can be apprehended in two modes:

[12] Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe* (New York: Penguin Books, 1953/1977).

[13] Dee Brown, *Creek Mary's Blood* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1980).

[14] Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth* (Harper San Francisco, 1976/1992).

[15] Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe.*

as Father and as Grandfather. In the context of world religions generally, this division corresponds to the division between, on the one hand, God who has personal attributes and can therefore be known, and on the other hand, God in his absolute, infinite nature which the human mind cannot concretely grasp. Definitively, Brown describes the difference between the two as follows:

> *Wakan-Tanka* as grandfather is the Great Spirit independent of manifestation, unqualified, unlimited, identical to the Christian Godhead, or to the Hindu *Brahma-Nirguna*. *Wakan-Tanka* as father is the Great Spirit considered in relation to His manifestation, either as Creator, Preserver, or Destroyer, identical to the Christian God, or to the Hindu *Brahma-Saguna*.[16]

Going back to Mary Dee's report, the mundane hunting and hide curing that she cites are those activities after the symbolic mind has dimmed, for when that mind is in full force, all activities are (to continue with the vocabulary of the Oglala Sioux) *wakan* (holy, sacred). They are sacred in "corresponding"—Swedenborg's word—with the other world and thereby perforating the line between the two. "This world" acquires its own reality only to the degree that its ties to the other world are forgotten. Joseph Brown quotes Black Elk as saying, "Any man who is attached to the senses and to the things of this world lives in ignorance."[17]

Coda

Having begun with an anecdote, I shall conclude with one as well, my favorite in my well stocked repertoire relating to Joseph Brown. Joseph was accompanying Black Elk on a mission to Denver and a long winter's bus ride landed them there well around midnight. Hotels were filled, and the only available shelter from the bitter cold was little more than a flophouse. Entering their room, Black Elk glanced at its dingy furnishings, took one breath of its foul air, and announced: "This requires a sweat!" Chairs were upturned, blankets stripped from the beds to cover them, and the electric heater impressed for the sacred fire. The men peeled down to their breech cloths, and the purging bath began.

It is an allegory, this midnight scene. In dismal, uninviting circumstances, two men, ethnically diverse, saw what needed to be done, and

[16] Ibid., p. 5.

[17] Joseph Epes Brown, *The Sacred Pipe*, p. 4.

instantly did it. If our improvisations in our respective circumstances could be equally inventive, emphatic, and right-minded, no better tributes could be offered to the life and work of Joseph Epes Brown.

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Features in

The Essential Sophia: The Journal of Traditional Studies
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