

Traditional Indigenous Knowledge: Animism

The writer interviewed Elder Manny Brown on 2022-05-27 (personal communication) regarding his special relationship and experiences between animals, wolves/dogs and Indigenous peoples. Elder Manny is 81 years old and spent most of his life in nature. He currently lives in Sucker River Indian Reserve of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band in Saskatchewan.

Elder Manny is very familiar with animal and Indigenous people relationships. He indicated for thousands of years the Indigenous people shared a cooperative spirit with animals, wolves, and all living creatures. Elder Manny's great grandparents indicated one distinctive species - the wolf or dog - intimately connected to humankind. The animals, or wolf in this case, was exceptionally close to humans, sharing a cooperative spirit of respect and humility, and sharing food. While on a hunt together, the humans and wolf shared the kill and the wolf was given a generous portion of good meat. The wolves, and animals, were equal in 'nature'; thereby giving scraps to wolves/dogs was unheard of during that period.

Because of the special relationships between them, the sharing of food evolved to further relationships between people and wolves, wherein empirical experiences progressed to include companionship, and emotional and moral support that provided a venue for safety and well-being.

As well in ceremony - the wolf, coyote, bear, loon and raven played an essential role. They brought song and dance to the Indigenous peoples, from which came various ceremonies and culture, innately entrenched in the ways of mother earth and father sky.

One example of such experiences is the bear fasting in a den for six months or more, without food and water. What are the bear's celestial and mythical experiences during that period of fast? The Elders say, in the springtime, the bear will re-appear from the east with the yellow-colored sun rising. The people will summon others to commence the summer ceremonial activities again outdoors. New or additional songs, dance, stories and attire ideas will come with it. Could it be that the bear's fasting has elicited and confirmed the existence of a mystical philosophy that all Creation is equal to sky, earth and all earthly beings; that physical shapes, only look different from the eye view? Moreover, the bear may have a calling to provide ceremonial and medicinal gifts to the people, which only emanates in ceremony, sleep, fasting and visions.



The wolves evolved to “dogs” to some level, as we know them, but not fully domesticated, as they were still free to roam in the hills and land as protectors of the tribe. The Indigenous people observed the wolves closely as they went about their daily activities. They observed the wolves functioning as an immediate and extended family clan. The wolves’ natural family structure was important to the Indigenous peoples, and children were included to observe the natural ways of the wolves. There was no harsh upbringing, instead children were given the opportunity to imitate the behaviors of the wolf family. Humility, loyalty, compassion, and sharing were some of the wolves’ traits that contributed to mutual respect and the ability to function together.

Elder Manny further indicated that should an Indigenous person or people feel distraught while amongst nature, the wolf had the ability to intuitively know a situation of distress and intervene accordingly. There are stories of where Indigenous persons were lost and hurt while in the woods of nature. The wolf would stay with the lost, injured person. In some situations, the wolf would bring food or lead the injured person to a fresh kill. The wolf would stay with the person until they were close to the tribe’s camp, and then leave.

One story comes to mind of two girls of about thirteen years of age looking for a ride home after being lost in the bush for several hours. I offered them a ride as it was getting quite late in the evening. They both sat at the back of the vehicle cab. One of the girls seemed sad. I asked her if she was fine. She replied she was feeling sad because she recently lost her uncle and they were very close. She said he was middle age and died four days ago. She proceeded to tell her story about missing him so much.

At that particular time, prior her uncle’s funeral, this young girl was feeling so much grief she could not stop crying for two days, and she decided to go for a walk in the woods on a trail where she and her uncle walked many times. As she walked, she was crying again. She walked further into the woods when suddenly, she heard dry leaves and twigs breaking in front of her - in the bush to her right. By then her face cheeks were full with tears. From the bush, to her right, appeared a large four-legged animal. She was too surprised to be scared. She recognized from prior sightings - (it) was a wolf. The wolf slowly approached her. She stood very still and stared at the wolf. The wolf came ‘right up to her face’, licked her tears away, and said, “Do not grieve much nusiim (grandchild), your uncle earned his stay here, he is now gone to a nice place. Go to your family now, and you will be fine”. The wolf turned back into the woods and she did not see the animal being again. She slowly walked back to the village. When she arrived home and went into her mother’s home, the heaviness of grief and hurt was gone. Her mother did not say a word but she went on with her chores. Instantly, she felt pity for her mother after losing her brother. Immediately she felt an overwhelming urge to assist her mother ‘clean the house’, and she completely lost sense of time as it was dark when she was done. She felt so much relief, she never felt the grief at the level again that she experienced prior. She believes she witnessed her uncle in spirit. To this day, I have not seen the young girl. I wonder how she is doing.



With respect to all living animals, I wish to share a story of the winged being, in this case the owl. This is a story told to us by my elderly auntie, Gelicia Bear. Gelicia has now passed to another world – bless her.

Glecia indicated she was approximately ten years old when her younger sister and she returned home after attending a church service. Their parents noticed a cow was missing from the small herd of cows they kept near home. Glecia and her sister were approached by the Elders of the community and instructed to look for the cow out in the woods. Glecia and her sister were happy to go as they love being in the bush. They had food and drink to take with them. They left home and walked for several hours looking and hoping to see tracks on the ground. It was getting late in the evening when they came across cow tracks leading into a muddy swamp. At the end of the swamp, they noticed something moving or struggling in the swampy mud. They approached the ‘moving thing’ and there stuck in the mud was the lost cow. They could not help the cow out of the mud as it was ‘really stuck’.

It was getting quite late in the day, so they decided to return home. Unfortunately, they were lost. The bush around them looked the same and they had no clue about the way home. They left the swamp area and went back into the woods, assuming the direction they chose was the right path home. After walking for several hours, they noticed their surroundings no longer seemed familiar. Glecia’s sister was crying as her feet began to blister and her shoes worn. They still had on their ‘church clothes’ and shoes, not meant for walking in the bush. Glecia had no extra cloth with her so she removed her upper undergarment and wrapped her sister’s blistered feet to assist with protecting her feet.

It was now getting dark, and they sensed or knew they were lost. Glecia’s sister became fearful so she assisted her to stay calm by telling her that their family will come soon – that she should not be afraid. They decided to sit by a large, dry poplar tree, thinking they would spend the night in the area. As they sat by the log, a few minutes went by when suddenly they heard an owl make its distinctive owl hoot. Glecia looked up into a nearby tree and saw an owl looking down on them. It hooted again and it flew to another tree nearby. Glecia and her sister sensed the owl wanting their attention, so they approached the owl on the tree. The owl flew to another tree and hooted each time after it landed. This went on for several times but they kept following the owl. After walking in the woods following the owl, they soon heard yelling in the distance in front of them.

They saw low dim lights flashing in the distance. When they got closer to the lights and yelling, they saw a large group of people approaching them with barn lanterns, clothing, and blankets. Glecia recognized Elder Alec Bishop from the community who appeared to lead the people through the bush as they looked for Glecia and her sister. The family and people ran to them and immediately surrounded them; some were crying, and some were, what appeared to be dancing from reprieve and exultation that they found the girls safe. Glecia and her sister were taken home, carried in blankets by the group. For the next few days, both girls were treated with care and much love, and some would not leave them far from sight.



Several written books and articles account Glecia Bear's story of the owl experience, and show slight differentiations of the story. While working for Lac La Ronge Indian Band, we (culture committee) invited Elder Glecia Bear to attend a traditional culture camp in Stanley Mission in 1994 and, the above written narrative is the Cree version of her story she shared with us then. Furthermore, while visiting my dad at our family home, my aunt, Glecia Bear shared her 'who who' 'owl' story several times when my siblings and I were children. Aunt Glecia Bear's maiden name was Glecia Laliberte, and resided in our community, Green Lake, Saskatchewan for most of her young life prior to marriage.

Therefore, I apologize now if other written versions vary from our account; so in good faith, I am sharing here our version of events of Elder Glecia Bear's story - not intended to discount prior submissions. Creator bless her, and our Ancestors be with her!

In summary, it is fundamentally important to remember that all people of the globe are of one mother of the earth. The late Elder Billy Ermine reiterated many times that the concept of color coded in humankind advertently characterizes Nations, and is an illusion; it is divisional and contributes to insubordinate and subordinate relationships amongst people. Unfortunately, in this case, the ruling class have established an organizational system that encourages unhealthy and inequitable behavior patterns causing cultural racism/discrimination. Although, we have come to recognize that such ideologies are meaningless in contrast to the continued special relationship we have with mother earth, animal beings, wolfs/dogs and the owl. As the deceased Elder Mary Cook indicated - to heal from too much negativity in our current lifestyles, we must open our heart and mind, to the natural ways: accept and invite an (w)holistic, animistic way of life; and, we will experience harmony and balance in everything, everywhere.

Submitted:

Kah Wah Ci Peit

Larry J Laliberte

Traditional Indigenous Knowledge Advocate

2022-05-31

