Why Two Younger Brothers Wanted a Beaver Wife: 
Intimate Cree and Not-Cree Knowledge of Non-Human Persons

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In my last year's sortie into Tricksters, specifically Wolverine-Tricksters, and their relations with humans, we found that this first-born teacher was able to offer guidance in how predators may try to outwit and gain power over their prey. Wolverine also exampled an unfriendly self-centeredness that led to the dissolution of his community of animal persons, a characteristic later found occasionally in some shamans. And we are enjoined to remember that when we laugh at him, he grins back at us, for we are the joke. This paper turns from predation and egoism to a more domestic, nurturing example of what the Crees, and we, can learn from observing and hearing about the animals. This year I look at beavers, who stand in marked contrast to wolverine-Tricksters.

Beavers are not predatory, and they are not solitary. The adults live with each other in a relation of friendly distance and domestic composure, stay in lodges through the seasonal cycle, keep their children until they are fully mature, show their young affection, and show the will and ability to work in independent coordination, and live well together. I will introduce them via Samuel Hearne, writing from his years working for the Hudson's Bay Company at Prince of Wales Fort and at Cumberland House in the late 18th century. Following on his explanation that beavers never relieve themselves in their homes, but rather in the water, he goes on to say:

... I am the better enabled to make the assertion from having kept several of them till they became so domesticated as to answer to their name, and follow those to whom they were

accustomed, in the same manner as a dog would do; and they were as much pleased at being fondled as any animal I ever saw ... they are kept in my sitting room, where they were the constant companions of the Indian women and children, and were so fond of their company, that when the Indians were absent for any considerable time, the beaver discovered great signs of uneasiness, and on their return, showed equal marks of pleasure, by fondling on them, crawling into their laps, laying on their backs, sitting erect like a squirrel, and behaving to them like children who see their parents but seldom. In general during the winter they lived on the same food that the women did, and were remarkably fond of rice and plumb-pudding; they could eat partridges and venison very freely, but I never tried them with fish... (Samuel Hearne 1795, in Morgan 1868:315-316)

Hearne has a good deal more to say about beavers, and about the self-appointed experts of his day who wrote nonsense about beavers.

But I will move on now to Cree oral tradition, as recounted to me in 1964 by John Blackned. What follows is an abstracted synopsis, which is a disrespectful diminishment of the version John told me, but for now it must suffice.

In the atiukan story of the Younger Brother who married a beaver, she is his first girl-friend, but he finds her not quite pretty enough, and goes off to search further for his wife. He tries several other girls, ranging from a whiskeyjack to a caribou. They are willing, but he stays with each for only one night, and finds serious faults with them. Only by these youthful mating adventures is he able to learn that the beaver girl was the best choice, after all.

This Beaver girl is first rejected by her new husband, who criticizes her black teeth and matted hair. Then she is told by her grandmother to stop crying; he is going to come back to her, so she should polish her teeth and smooth her fur. Right away she starts to make herself attractive, cleaning her teeth to the pleasant light orange they are now, and grooming herself with her musk oil, making her fur smooth, soft, and aromatic. And also, very significantly, waterproof. This transformation presages the waterproofing of the Younger Brother’s mitt that he throws to her,
WHY TWO YOUNGER BROTHERS WANTED A BEAVER WIFE

later in the story. She dives with the mitt and then throws it back to him, and he finds it is dry. The miracle is then repeated with an increment when the Younger Brother himself is able to dive in and live with her in the water.

Their marriage worked out well, and he promptly taught the beavers the importance of making very thick, secure walls for their lodges and making multiple exits. Human hunters then found it much harder to capture the beavers, and when the Older Brother learned why, he became very angry. Finally, the Younger Brother and his Wife were caught by the Older Brother in a lodge and all the exits save one were blocked. At that exit the Older Brother waited with his axe. The Younger Brother told his Wife, “You go out first”, sending her to her death. The Older Brother took the Younger Brother and his dead wife to his lodge and called everyone to a feast. The Younger Brother gave his older sibling a powerful warning about this feast, but he was ignored, and the touch of his wife’s cooked flesh to his lips suddenly transformed the rivers in the surrounding landscape into an incredible mid-winter breakup, so that he was able to escape from humans, back into the water. The older brother was not quite able to catch him again, and the miracle was completed when he transformed into an anomalous, giant beaver.

John Blackned called the story of this particular Younger Brother, “The Boy Who Was Never Born Naturally”. Never knowing his human mother (a victim of an unwitting Witiko cesarian), he was saved and kept for a while by a colony of mice. Then he was guided to young adulthood by an older brother whose good advice he often stubbornly rejected. Their moral universe became confused. They were dishonest and disobedient towards their father, and after unwittingly killing their father’s Lynx-wife and children, they anticipated his wrath by killing him. This leads up to the Younger Brother finally refusing some available female human companionship and going off alone, to find his wife elsewhere. From among the non-human persons who might be wives, he eventually made the very best choice.

Grey Owl/Archie Belaney was a famous 20th century
impersonator who was never born a natural Indian. He is of particular interest to me because he lived intimately with beavers and wrote four books about family life with them, and because he seems to have been seriously under-socialized, and so embodies some of the spirit of the mythic Younger Brother. As a young child of Scottish ancestry, Archie was left by his single mother to be raised by two maiden aunts living in Hastings, England. A loner child, he was like the classic mythic orphan, who overcomes obstacles in order to become a hero of his people. Archie’s obstacles were his flawed family identity that conflicted with the pressure to grow up a proper English boy. He spent a lot of time in the woods, watching animals and making pets of some of them. As a young adult he went to Canada, first working briefly at the Eaton’s store in Toronto and then taking his fateful plunge into northern Ontario. He acted up a bit, got into a little trouble with the law, and then was taken in and mentored by an Ojibwa family. Under their tutelage Archie developed bush skills, married, and in a few years’ time was a fairly successful trapper.

During his young adult years Archie tried a series of wives and had three children that he did not help to raise. He was not open and honest with them, and was stubbornly self-absorbed. The moment of truth came with he and his most enduring wife were trapping in the Maritimes. Encouraged by his wife, he felt sympathy for the young whose parents he had trapped, and decided that he could not continue to make a living by killing beavers. He decided to try to get income by publishing in magazines that focused on wildlife stories. He succeeded, but when his wife “Anahero” (Gertie) found that his requirements as a writer meant that he was completely preoccupied and demanded silence, she went off for the winter, prospecting in northern Ontario.

And that winter, you could say that he had a beaver wife. She was a pet beaver that they had named Jelly Roll, but who he temporarily decided to call The Queen. Very much like living out the myth of the younger brother who was never born naturally, Grey Owl tried to live with the Queen, wintering with her in his cabin. He found that Jelly Roll was insistent that they work out an
acceptable division of the lodge arrangements. She had her conditions for staying with him, and he was obliged to accommodate her. They sometimes shared his bed, and they conversed with each other a great deal. When Rawhide, a male, joined them, he too was dominated by Jelly Roll. But, being more skilled in beaver relationships, he eventually turned the tables, becoming a proper male.

Grey Owl’s writing was very good, and publication brought him a more than adequate income. His persuasive articulation of life in the northern wilderness was crucial to his future as a lecturer, representing himself as a public Indian.

Lacking a mature sense of social responsibility, Archie poured his considerable talents into creating a compensatory fantasy of himself as an exotic mythic figure – the historian Donald Smith compared him to Hiawatha. Archie even claimed Geronimo as an ancestor. His own ideal persona was of a stereotypic Indian. And thus falsified, he became hugely popular as a speechmaker; passionate, extemporaneous and good-looking. By means of his elaborate subterfuge, he consequently succeeded in making a major and international contribution to nature conservancy.

He COULD have just become a culturally Metis guy, trapping in northern Ontario, but he had more exalted ambitions, and he pursued them relentlessly and realized them. He transformed himself, not into a giant beaver but into an iconic (giant in the sense of “bigger than life”) Indian, tailored to appeal to the stereotypic expectations of urbane Canadians and Britishers (including speaking with the Prime Minister, the Governor General, and having some personal time with the British Royal family). His public influence was so great that the Canadian government valued and hired him as a conservation spokesperson, and he was voluntarily institutionalized in a national park, in a human/beaver house/lodge. He lived in a beaver preserve of his own.

Grey Owl/Archie worked himself to an early death by traveling widely (and drinking heavily) – twice to Britain - to give
hundreds of exhaustingly scheduled public performances, and his eloquent speeches advocating environmentalism were heard by hundreds of thousands of admirers. He was simultaneously a personal anomaly and a mythic frontiersman. He made movies of beavers and of wilderness canoeing on northern rivers. He was particularly a champion of beavers, with whom I believe he could identify wishfully, as fitting his private, juvenile "just a little animal" self-image and gaining the pleasure of intimacy with beavers, who are so readily open to the affectionate relations that he almost never could open himself to, with humans.

At some level he knew that eventually he would be found out, but, remarkably, those who did recognize his imposture and could have exposed him chose not to do so until after his death. One Cree spokesperson said (and I invite you to admire this phrasing), "He wears himself with skill; he has done a good service for his people. We know Wa-Sha-Quon-Asin is not born of us, and we say nothing. For us it is of no importance." (John Tootoosis, 1936, in Ruffo 1996:145. Ruffo’s great uncle Jimmy was one of Archie’s Ojibwa mentors)

I’ll close this section of my paper with the opening quote in Book Two of his Pilgrims of the Wild. Archie quotes Walt Whitman:

I think I could turn and live with the animals, they are so placid and self-contained.
I stand and look at them sometimes half the day long.
They do not sweat and whine about their condition.
They do not lay awake in the dark and weep for their sins.
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God.
No one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,
Not one is respectable or industrious over the whole earth.
So they show their relations to me, and I accept them,
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.
So much for the two mythic younger brothers. Now I want to turn to what the Crees could have learned from closely watching beavers. From reading Grey Owl I was set to meditating deeply about the relation of beavers and humans. I find that beavers and humans exemplify in common an aspect of Cree world view, in terms of a spiritual holism in a “great community of persons.” The parallel lives of beavers and Crees is very significant, as George Wapachee intimated to me.

The beaver is very much like the Cree, or is it the other way around? While in their true environment, they are relentlessly busy in staying alive. The Cree lodge is based on how the beaver builds its lodge to keep warm during the winter. I had the occasion to listen to small beavers while their parents were swimming outside. It was almost like listening to their mimicking cries of impatience ‘when can we come out’? while their parents were constantly slapping their tails against the water signaling the present danger... I did a piece on beavers for a document I prepared for my brother Matthew relating to training for young people. (George Wapachee personal communication, 11 June 2007)

Let me give some particular character traits that we can relate personally to:

1) Beavers sometimes touch noses to greet each other.

2) They sleep close together, the kits holding on to each other’s fur with their hands. In the winter, they sleep a lot, secure in snug lodges.

3) They are models of domesticity, industrious skills, and nurturing.

4) The older beavers obtain the respect of the younger ones.

5) They are not predatory. Still, they are not pacifists. They drive off intruding beavers and may injure or kill other intruders as well.
6) And this Garden of Eden, like so many other gardens of other species, is subject to the effects of own-species overcrowding. Hunters find many badly scarred beavers when working an overpopulated area.

7) They readily adapt to living with humans who choose to take them home to their own lodges. The way beavers like to snuggle is like the woman’s affectionate invitation “Can we be close?” In many other ways, beavers (especially the females) are like affectionate humans, friendly in sounds and in touch, warm, soft, and aromatic, and inclined to climb into your lap for caressing.

8) They are quite conversational, reciprocating our words with a variety of vocalizations. Grey Owl translates a northern Ojibwa beaver euphemism: “the little talking people.” (1936:30)

9) They play at wrestling, upright like Sumo-wrestlers; then fall on their backs as if laughing at their exertions.

10) They are not always workaholics, but rather enjoy seasonal periods of leisure. When work is needed, they are ready and able to build well-adapted waterworks and to gather food for the future, and easily coordinate their work, without interfering with each other.

The Crees would have learned from beavers partly from having them around as pets – a kind of home-based experiential-learning, being close to them and watching them as children but also as adults.

- women would have their friendship in the home. The stories of women suckling beaver kits is, of course, suspect, but it is also possible. The kits are NOT born with their teeth erupted, but even when the teeth have erupted, they are able
to suckle their mothers with no nipple amputations. Morgan has a good story of a friend’s trapping partner who claimed his wife nursed a beaver kit, and Samuel Hearne also believes that it happened.

- Men would share some of this domestic familiarity, and then learn from seeing what beavers do around their own homes, and appraise their intelligence in action, in the mutual play of their strategies of beaver hunting.

In conclusion, I believe that Crees learned from Trickster figures the psychology and techne of predation and the dysfunctional consequences of selfishness and ignoring the effects of our actions. In addition, I believe that the Crees learned from beavers how to live well in families. There were other teachers, but that is for later papers.

In summary terms, here are qualities humans share in common and/or might have learned from beavers:

- Beavers will eat available vegetation, but will also adapt, as guests, to what we eat, and crave sugar
- They are emotionally sensitive and expressive, though more reticent than, say, otters (especially female otters) (Bob Arnebeck, personal communication; Preston 1976)
- They are quite vocal, from whimpers and moans to sounds of delight or gossip
- They care for appearances, grooming and oiling one’s self and sometimes grooming others
- They keep a neat and secure, though smelly to us, lodge
- They dispose of body waste in the water or on the ice, not in the lodge
- They are fairly affectionate: with the young asking for and giving a lot of cuddling
- They play with each other and with humans
- They compete through a contest of strength in Sumo-like wrestling – note that Cree men used a beaver femur for a contest of strength
- They rely upon coordinated, rather than cooperative, work
- They practice non-interference, within limits
- They are more egalitarian than hierarchical, but recognize and respond to youthful incompetence, on the one hand, or the competence of elders, on the other.
- They appear to be [im]passive in the face of threats when withdrawal is not an option
- They take easily and well to domestication with humans and easily become pets
- They are at once autonomous and domestic [vs. wolverines]
- There seems to be something ‘childlike’ when the young play
- There is intelligent planning in their seasonal round of activities

Note that for all that the beavers have to sustain their peaceable non-kingdom, they seemingly break this ethic when they “play tricks” at sneaking and stealing food from each other (even from a feeble and starving old mother). There is a bit of the Trickster present. And for all that they are very affectionate to kits and to some degree with each other, they seem not to be crippled by grieving the diminishments and deaths of each other. Can I say that they are somehow able to accept suffering, diminishment and death? A pet beaver showed compassion to a woman who was depressed, by climbing into her lap, across her breast and putting its cheek against hers. Cats and dogs and human infants might also do this, sensing the adult human’s emotions. This seems to me to be empathetic, so maybe it is acceptance that is at work.

And why do all my authors seem so smitten by beavers? The authors are a quite various bunch, but share an obvious sense of commitment. Some try to explain it, as the romantic poet Whitman, or the hard scientist Victor Scheffer, who introduces the re-published books by Grey Owl. Rather than speaking about this analytically, I will answer my question and end this paper by telling you a story.
One spring, a farmer was having trouble with beavers damaging his orchard and flooding his land, so he finally dynamited the lodge. Not long afterward, two young girls were walking in a field nearby, and found a beaver kit. They picked it up and cuddled it, took it home, dried it off, fondled it and tried to take care of it. But they realized that they did not know much about the care and feeding of baby beavers, so they took the beaver to the nearby animal rescue lady. Months passed, and the beaver flourished, and became the partner in the woman’s visits to schools to speak about animals and especially about beavers. She would ask the children to sit on the floor in the center of the room, and then speak while circling around them, the beaver following behind her to show the children what was being talked about.

On one such school visit, the woman realized that she could not hear the beaver coming along behind her, and turned to see the beaver standing upright, sniffing, and then walking over and climbing into the lap of the little girl who had found him. You can imagine how the little girl felt.

REFERENCES

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