The title comes from my wondering about a phrase in Hallowell, where he suggests a "great community" of persons. How do the Cree, and some students of the Cree, approach the discernment of relations between human persons and many kinds of other living things (including spirit beings) (Black 1977, Hallowell 1955, Preston 1975)? The answer is not simple, for the question raises one case of the universal, eternal predicament of understanding personal relationships.

Asking a question of this subtlety invites a reflexive comparison. How do we approach the discernments of relationships? We may do it as it has been done traditionally: through the direct experience of our senses, through the created experience of our imagination, and through the indirect examples provided in myths (both old and new) and other narratives. And more recently, through books and other arts and media.

In this paper I focus on a Cree myth of the world just prior to the appearance of humans, when the animals were the people of that time (Preston 1975:150–5). Unlike the humans who will arrive, and unlike animals since that time, there appears to be just one individual of each species. But like humans, some of them lived in a group, with a leader. The relations described for this group, their intentions, actions, and the consequences, characterize a kind of original form of community, one against which subsequent forms of community may be compared and better understood. The processes leading to the disintegration of this pre-human group highlight some aspects of changing relations between persons of several kinds, so it is useful to examine these relationships.

But how we approach the recognition of these persons and their relations is a difficult question, if we are to keep precisely to making our answers in terms of a culturally constituted mode of understanding. We will focus with varying intensity and credibility on (1) their names, (2) their appearance(s) and their agency in events, (3) the places and times of their appearance, and (4) other, sometimes more covert facets that may reveal who they truly are.
NAMES AS DESCRIPTORS OF RELATIONSHIPS

Names are universally useful in designating persons, classes of persons, and communities of persons. They usually indicate some defining characteristic. In the Cree myth individual persons are identified by their species name, as Wolverine, Marten, Skunk, and so on. I believe that these named persons are the mythic grandfathers of their very numerous descendants, and I believe that they correspond to what Hallowell describes for the Northern Ojibwa. He says that the name pawaganak names a class of persons that may be also named dream persons: those whose actions we hear about in stories that are classed by the same name, pawaganak. This seems to correspond to the kind of persons described in Cree atiukan narratives I have recorded on the east coast of James Bay (atiukan is the Waskaganish term). Because they appear to constitute the first, formative persons in the great community of persons, and may themselves continue to be mystically influential in the present, they are collectively referred to as “grandfathers” (a parallel to the mystical Christian notion of “the cloud of witnesses”).

All this is speculative, and yet it is important because mythic traditions are important, and we must do the best we can to understand their meaning. With regard to the problems of naming, consider the example of one of our own mythic traditions. Is the man Jesus the same as the spirit of Christ, or the same person as a transcendent God, or the same as the Holy Spirit, or the same as the immanent human spirit in every person? We are plunged into a history of uncertainty, dogma, interpretation and conflicts, often focussed on the names themselves. But do these names tell us enough about their referent(s)? Surely they are only the first step in seeking to grasp or hold some deeper significance or personage behind the names — and even behind all our words.

Similarly, in “The orders of the dreamed”: George Nelson on Cree and northern Ojibwa religion and myth, 1823 (Brown and Brightman 1988) is the turtle who is named in conjuring ceremonies a generic turtle, a particular turtle, a mythical condensation of one or all turtles, a euphemism, or something else? I suspect that this name, Turtle, serves as a referential symbol for a kind of personage that is regarded as characteristic of turtles, not simply as we know them from observation, but as we would discern them (and abstract spiritually from them?) if we knew turtles intimately as fellow participants in the Great Community of persons — in the ideal
understanding of all persons in relation to all other persons, known truly.

Now let’s move on to a first consideration of the Cree atiukan of the first community. The name for this mythic group is revealing. Just how comparable this first group is to present human groups was made clear to me in a discussion with my mentor, the late John Blackned. We were talking of the various Cree terms for types of groups, and I asked whether the group of animals in this story would have been called beykodeno, the term for the primary human group (Preston 1980a):

[Dick] When the wolverine and the other animals were living together, will there be any way to know if all of those animals ate the same food?

[John] When one person [animal] killed something they all ate it.

[Dick] Could you call that group beykodeno?

[John] Not beykodeno, but one settlement, beygunatido ‘they all do the same thing’, just like [the present-day community we are in,] Waskaganish.¹

In our story, then, these grandfathers were very like humans, but they were not fully like humans. They had enough in common to constitute a community, comparable with human groups through history and still today. But they did not have the primary groups (beykodeno) that make up human communities. The different names for groups tell us that much, but not much more. We will return to this below.

To sum up this section, then, we get our start, but only a start, on names as the descriptors of persons and groups. But we reduce the scope for understanding if we get stuck on the point of naming. Whether we name specific individuals, groups or generic types, we are tempted to ask for a label first and foremost, as if this word will pin them down for our possession. This mistake may reflect our neo-colonial heritage, as in the “butterfly-collecting anthropology” that Edmund Leach critiqued. Names do not give us ownership of ideas about persons, but only points of contact to move toward a better understanding. Besides, names are not so fixed to persons or things as we might expect. Not only variations of names occur; the substitution of names is rather commonplace and may be of less consequence than we would think. For every name given, we should

¹ John did not speak English, and so could not be asked about the translation of the English word. But Alice Channer, from Waswanipi, in translating this tape, noted that, for her, this is close to the word community.
consider the possibility that the referent could be called something else—not arbitrarily any other name, but reasonably, potentially recognizably, some other name.

But why should we expect that the key to understanding cultural traditions lies in dimensions of names rather than in, say, conditions\(^2\) attributed to personages and relationships, real and imagined, that are possible in the Cree traditional world of experience, and perhaps possible for all of us, via a universal algebra of personal relationships. And so to the next section.

APPEARANCE AND AGENCY IN EVENTS, AS DESCRIPTORS OF RELATIONSHIPS

How, then, are we to get past names? We get our knowledge where we can, by the appearances and actions we perceive through the senses, by intuition, dream, vision, narratives, and by cautious, logical or systematic, yet flexible inference (Black 1977, Preston 1980b, c, d, e, f). We cannot equate these types or sources of understanding, but rather use each source (observation, etc.) as the basis for triangulations with the other facets of being, or being personages. We will now see what further understanding we can obtain from the narrative, though I can give only a synopsis here.

In this Cree atiukan, humans have not yet appeared, and some of the animals of that time lived together as one group, with a wolverine as their leader. When any one of them killed some food, they all shared it, like a feast. Through his conjuring, the wolverine learns from his spirit ally that humans are going to appear soon, and the animals are going to become food for humans. Anticipating this threat to their group, the animals try to transform themselves into more human-like persons by a mimicry of the human primary group. They attempt this by marrying across species, and some humorous marriage attempts are specified in the narrative. But it doesn’t work — it isn’t their nature.

When a particular one of them (Marten), consumed by his characteristic curiosity, neglects the leader’s admonition never to go near the trail of a giant skunk, they are pursued and must flee for their lives. Through his conjuring, the wolverine learns from his spirit ally where the giant skunk

\(^2\) Conditions might be seen as dimensions, such as from competence to power, from food storing through sharing and up to eat-all feasts, from intuitions of connectedness to miraculous appearances.
is and how soon he will catch up to them. When the fateful confrontation is imminent, Wolverine digs a hole in the snow, right in the path, crouches down in the hole\(^3\) and he, with the help of his “little brothers and sisters” attacks and kills the skunk and scatters his remains in small pieces (hence the diminished size and potency of present-day skunks).

Wolverine lets his success go to his head, and leaves his little brothers and sisters behind. When humans do appear, a radical transformation of the animal community has taken place: they have lost their leader (we do not know what they did then), and have lost their ability to talk with each other. Wolverine, in his pride, kills the human’s leader, and consequently loses his attending spirit to the humans. Wolverines are ever after solitary beings, and the rest of the animals are dispersed and hunted by humans.

To take briefly only two examples, Marten and Wolverine, we now can know them better. Marten (the functional equivalent of Eve in this Cree Garden of Eden) is curious about anything out of the ordinary, and thought to get a look at Skunk’s path by adroitly and secretly burrowing under the snow and just coming up beside it for a little look. A trap for marten is still made to look curious, like some branches out of place, and it still works. Wolverine’s aggressive power to overcome their common enemy becomes a source of too much pride — he sets himself apart. Literally blinded by Skunk’s *widui* and socially blinded by his own power, he becomes — and continues to be — the destructive and solitary enemy of human hunters, an example of the hubris that leaders should be careful to avoid.

The first community is no more; they are no longer *beygunatido*, living together and “all doing the same thing”, but are now each separately doing what it is their nature to do. Species are now communicatively and spatially distinct from each other, though the individual persons within any species are very much alike. Our story does not include this condition, and I did not think to ask John whether a flock of geese, for example, might be said to be “all doing the same thing” to the extent of being considered *beygunatido*. Perhaps being able to talk is a prerequisite, or perhaps John would have found the idea of a community of geese plausible. As far as I know, the names for groups are now applied only to humans. And so it is to the appearance and agency of two named kinds of groups, *beygunatido* and especially *beykodeno*, that I will now turn.

\(^3\) Thus becoming the bait in order to capture power, as Lévi-Strauss prescribes.
The verb form -ode- (or -ote-) means ‘to be a group’; odeno means — may appear as — ‘encampment, settlement, village, or town’. In the name beykodeno, with prefixed beyk-'one', odeno is specified in social scale, reduced to the primary human group, marked by each beykodeno “having their own food”. This sounds as if the basic group is equal to the commensal group, but it’s a bit more subtle. The meaning is a near approximation to English family: literally “one group”, but the prefix of the term actually refers to the order in which the group is mentioned in a narrative — the first-described group is beykodeno, the second is nishodeno, etc. These “family” groups are spatially as well as socially separate from each other, though at least some of the time they will join other families to constitute a larger beygunatido group. Still, what defined humans as separate from the animals in our myth, and ever since, seems to be based on marriage, or perhaps more precisely, on family.

But the dimensions of what “family” means in this context are not so clear. Hallowell says the Berens River Ojibwa do not have a word for ‘family’. During a discussion on the topic, John said that beykodeno refers to a man, his wife, and their sons and daughters, but “if his son went out, this son would be considered as beykodeno.” I think that this is saying if the son is hunting for himself, implying that he is going to have a wife who will be cooking for him, they will be separately “having their own food”. And if all their children “went out”, John said, “Even though they’re old, they still have their own food.” In response to my hypothetical case of an unmarried daughter cooking for her old father, John said, “Yes, they call them beykodeno, him and his daughter.” In this case the old man may have been given what a son, or someone else, kills. Still, when it is given to them, that is their own food. So it is not just who kills the food, for it may be given by the hunter before it is brought home, or by the hunter’s wife after it is brought home. They may cook it on the same fire as his son and his wife, and live in the same dwelling, but it is their separate food, and they are a distinct group. The beykodeno, a portable, personal life-cycle community, may move into — and out again from — a larger beygunatido community (cf. Speck 1931:597 on shifting band memberships).

Agency here seems based on who owns the food, and this is usually (but not always necessarily) set in a context of familial relations. If we proceed to tie the primary social agency of who owns the food to the

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4 The town name Odanak is the Abenaki equivalent, with the locative suffix.
primary spiritual agency, Speck’s assertion (1935:74–79) that the complex of hunting and eating is a holy act,5 we are ready to move into trying to discern some culturally central aspects of personal relationships.

TIME AND PLACE, AS DESCRIPTORS OF RELATIONSHIPS

In this section we will very briefly treat two dimensions of primary importance to hunters (and most loved by historians) — time and place. A successful hunter has to know when the animal persons he hunts will be most likely to appear in a specific place, and then he must be there to catch them. This knowledge of time and place is different for each region and species. Sedentary animals like beaver and bear are more predictable in terms of place. Waterfowl and barrenland caribou are more predictable in time of appearance. Actually finding them and getting them, though, involves many contingencies that humans are only partly able to foresee or cope with. This leads to our next section.

COVERT ASPECTS OF PERSONAL CONDITIONS AS DESCRIPTORS

Many things can interfere with the hunter’s strategies, including the failure of the hoped-for animals to appear when and where they were expected. An ethic regarding right relationships for land-based activities is part of the Cree traditional culture (Berkes, George and Preston 1992). Not interfering with the hunting of others is managed by allocating separate places, which has given rise to a large and various literature on territoriality (for a useful summary see Morantz and Bishop 1986). Land management works, for the most part, unless strangers appear and require changes, as the first humans did in our myth, as the fur trade gradually required in the 18th century and more intensively in the 19th century, and as industrial development and government supervision has most severely in this century.

Even more challenging to our ability to understand is the essentially romantic statement by some Cree hunters that they learn from the animals how to act in relationships. This forces us into more artistically literate sensibilities. For instance, T. H. White, in his The once and future king, has the wise magician Merlin teaching the young King Arthur how to be a good king by sending him to live with different kinds of animals — with geese, for instance, to learn how to live in a peaceful community.

5 This was confirmed for me by Gerti (Diamond) Murdoch, who added that she felt that it was the only holy act.
But the covert aspects of our Cree myth were centred on Wolverine’s intentions, not on those of geese. Living well together — living in community — is subject to the consequences of a full range of personal intentions, from love and generosity to aggression and pride.

In life, seeing the signs, appearances and behaviours of particular living things gives us a sense of their personages, though much may not be revealed. Secrecy, or concealment, is the key obstacle to discerning the true character of personages in relationships, and their practical consequences in events (Preston 1978; Brown and Brightman 1988:142). Keeping respect relations with animal-persons required hunters and their families to show tangible signs of respect, and spiritual communications of desire and respect. In death, the spirit or soul may reveal itself in ways not shown during life, increasing our knowledge of the true attitudes and abilities of both that individual person and that type of personage, human or other, in their relationships to us.

A NOTE ON AVOIDING OVERGENERALIZATION

Certainly, while appearances are confusing, we do not want to confuse species types. This would be a Cree blasphemy that is amply illustrated in other atiukanak and in more recent life. What we want to do is to see behind names and appearances. In myth, the descriptions of pawakanak provide numerous glimpses of these personages (Brown and Brightman 1988:138–9). Trickster is the exemplar, with his multiplicity of appearances and effects. His names are mere signs of his personage (recall Jesus, the Christ, the Holy Spirit, God), his appearances are changeable, multiple, and his effects vary all the way from the trivially absurd to the transformation of the world.

Variations between individuals, and variations in individually transmitted knowledge is part of the problem. Individual narrators, family lines of inheritance of tradition, and regional differences may be more numerous than we have thought, but they are variations on main themes — perhaps a Cree algebra of persons. Each person’s information, his convictions and doubts, and his confusions, will probably be familiar to others, as we struggle between the guiding ideals of personal community and the starker realities of life.

The Great Community is not an abstract set of characters. It is an always-potential set of relations and consequences.
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