In the early evening at the beginning of a recent winter, Joe Trapper, a respected elder, died suddenly of natural causes in Peawanuck, a Mushkegowuk Cree village 20 miles inland from the southern shores of Hudson Bay in northern Ontario. He was the first to die in this new site of the Weenusk Band. The land upon which he chose to finally rest had been his trapline throughout his life. The river had been a key artery, providing him with the meats of sustenance, the travel ways, and eventually taking the life of an adult daughter during the Flood the preceding spring. He watched the river daily "in a kind of dream", as it was described to me not long before he died, solitarily standing by the banks, gazing into the water and at the land and the sky.

For a couple of weeks preceding the old man's death, I had noticed him hauling wood from the bush with a steadfastness and determination which had impressed me to the point of commenting upon it in my daily journal. There was an intensity and meaning behind his actions which drew my attention. It contrasted with a general rowdiness in the village during that week, a period of drinking and fighting, assaults and skidoo accidents which had created a pervasive tension in the community. Nights reverberating with the revving of speeding skidoos and loud voices. It felt like something was going to blow. In the evening after the initial news of the old man's death and the prayers at his bedside of virtually everyone in the community, silence enveloped the village at last.

A year before his death, someone had told me that the old man had "extra senses". These were not so much mystical powers as something
acquired through the years, something I interpreted as a kind of wisdom derived through experience, a Cree epiphany if you will. I had been told that these extra senses enabled him to feel when someone was walking into his camp from as far away as ten miles, a sense of "feeling" the future, and the ability to dream into the future. It was impressed upon me that the sense, the knowledge of "feeling" the future, was distinct from "seeing" the future. The Cree term *damatisaen* was offered, which I glossed as the knowledge or sense that something was going to happen, a "kind of hunch".

Three weeks prior to the old man's death, he told his son that things were going to change for the family soon and to be prepared for changes. As mentioned, the old man had worked long and hard the preceding weeks to provide his wife with enough firewood for the winter. He had prepared his family for his departure by telling them how their lives were about to change. He died quickly and, unlike so many elders these past years who die alone in hospitals far to the south, he died at home on the land he had lived and harvested from all his days.

According to Craik (1979:75) in reference to the east coast Cree of James Bay, the word *bonipimatsiw* 'he quits living' is the term used for human beings, while the word *nipow*, 'he dies', is seldom used for humans but instead refers to animals. The word *bonipimatsiw* may thus be seen to imply an implicit notion of choice or control.

Joe Trapper, whose death I described earlier, certainly seemed to have exercised control over his dying. He was fortunate to have lived a long, full life which witnessed many changes yet brought him, in full circle, back to the land he knew best. He prepared his family for his departure and he appeared to be himself prepared. It may be useful to think that, rather than dying, he merely quit living. This theme of preparing others for one's departure appears often. Another old man, en route to a hospital in the south, turned to his grandson and told him: "This is the last time I'll see you", and he left him with the words to look after himself.

In contrast to the preceding natural deaths, two people were killed in Winisk, the former village site, by flood waters and ice. With respect to these individuals too, there was the belief by the people in the village that *damatisaen*, the feeling that something will happen, explains the conversations and actions of these two flood victims.

When walls of ice two stories high came grinding over the river bank the morning of the Winisk Flood, someone saw the elder, Mike Arrow, running away from, but being dragged under, the ice. Less than two hours before the flood, he had visited with the priest, bought a Bible and made a donation to the church. As this news was passed along by the survivors, there was a quiet knowing among the people that needed no further explanation. Mary Albany, a mother of three, died while trying to lift her children out
of the icy water. A week before the flood, Mary had left instructions with her family as to who was to look after her children “in case anything happens”. Twenty years before, she had been the person who answered the trail radio communication bringing the news that a boy from Winisk had drowned while skating while away at a residential school. At the time Mary reportedly said, “I wonder what it’s like to die by drowning?” A young man told me afterwards that he guessed that maybe that was why she had died in the manner she did, inferring the possibility of pashtahoeun — that by saying something, it may happen to you. In effect, a cursing of yourself or, as many villagers told me, “It is when a person does something leading to their death”. I am told that pashtahoeun was like a “sin against nature” in the old days. If you do something to an animal, for example, it will bring you bad luck. If someone gets sick and you make fun of them, the same sickness will happen to you (Oliver Mack, pers. comm.). I was given an example of a young hunter who had killed a moose and had brought it back to the village to butcher. He cut it up on the river bank, but did not finish the procedure before going home for a short time. The dogs got into the meat and finished it off. The next time this man went hunting he did not get anything and his motor broke down. The people say this was pashtahoeun (Margaret Mack, pers. comm.).

What seems to appear almost consistently with respect to dying is the notion that there is some aspect of feeling, a hunch that something is going to happen. The knowledge is not necessarily restricted to the dying but also to those left behind. A young woman in Winisk once told me that, a long time ago, her family was in the Bush trapping when her brother was killed in a town to the south. Her mother knew that something was wrong. She was cooking by the fire when three drops of blood appeared on the back of her hand. Her son had been shot three times. A few days later the family came in from the Bush to hear the news from a visitor that their son had been shot.

What has become evident from these stories is an overwhelming commonality in all of these quite different acts of dying in the sense that the actors in some way exhibited control over their passage. With the older people there seems to be clearly a kind of final preparation, while in relation to the accidental and abrupt deaths of the younger people, I have been told that, for example, their ghosts came by afterwards (doors were closing, lights going on and off, and other unexplainable incidents), or there was a kind of supernatural forewarning (the blood on the mother’s hand). In one way or another, something happened to try to inform and prepare those left behind.

Another story is worthy of noting here, this time about a young Cree man from the east coast of James Bay who was killed in a car accident. His
teacher at a community college in Ottawa had, a few weeks before, shown slides of a Mycenean archaeological site and asked her class to draw what stood out for them from the images. The young man concentrated on the graves, in fact, his entire series of eight drawings centered on death and burial, paying close attention to the way the bodies had been placed in the mass grave (Pierrette Carrier, pers. comm.). The teacher was struck by these powerful images at the time, and subsequently devastated six weeks later upon hearing of the student’s death.

The issue of preparing, controlling, or in some way knowing of one’s impending death requires further extrapolation, in light of dealing with cognitive control and a good death. Much of the work in this area has been done among aging Euro-Americans, often in nursing home settings. Cognitive control is a “subjective state”, characterized by a “high degree of independence” due to the achievement of personal goals and leading to a “self-perception of competence and control” (Campbell 1981:433). Fitting into Engel’s “giving up — given up” complex based on the observation “that illness is commonly preceded by a period of psychological disturbance, during which the individual feels unable to cope” (Engel 1968:293), Seligman (1975) presents cases correlating the loss of control, or “helplessness” to mortality, citing among many cases, Cannon’s famous “voodoo death” phenomenon.

In the early 1960s, Lieberman (1961:519) first noted the lack of a direct one-to-one correspondence between physical status and early mortality of elderly upon admission to institutions. He concluded that the relationship was a “highly complex one”. Langer and Rodin (1976) compared two groups of nursing home residents, one group who was given increased choice and responsibility in their lives. After two years, significant health differences favouring the group having increased responsibility had developed along with half the mortality rate among this group. Similarly, Seguin (1973:208) found an association between resident generation of their own social structure and their “sense of health, adequacy and well-being”. Certainly this adds force to Marshall’s (1980:124) suggestion that the “related” pursuits of “meaning and control” are “important in the last chapter of life”.

In light of these studies and more recently, Reid and William’s (1984) attack of the authenticity of voodoo death, I think it is time to take a different look at cognitive control. Rather than focus on the relationship between a lack of control and mortality, perhaps we should view the process of dying in terms of the “dying person’s purposive actions, which make the concept of ‘giving up-given up’, implying as it does defeat or the end of resistance, wholly inappropriate” (Reid and Williams 1984:128).

In all of the cases of dying people that I have been told accounts of or witnessed, it has always been interpreted by those left behind that there has
been some deliberate attempt on the part of the dying person to prepare themselves and others for their death. I would like to make a case that cognitive control (and not the loss of control) has a role in a good death. A good death then would seemingly incorporate the inherent meaning involved in the basic social contract — that is, Marcel Mauss's (1954) structuralist twist entangling the obligation to give, to receive and to pay back and, in this case, the commodity is human relationships.

Social responsibility, then, is an integral aspect to a good death and includes having the sense clearly in the perceptual realm of feeling an awareness, an intuition (or, for the Cree, *damatisaen*), that the end is near and that one should be prepared. This ability to discern, or be forewarned by events before death, evidently improves with age. According to Craik (1979:70), "an older person is said to be able to see 'as though he were walking there' someone who is about to die". I have been told that a long time ago, "in the old days before Indians knew about Jesus", they could tell who would die first in their group. People do not openly admit that such perceptual powers exist any longer, they simply belonged to a time before the white man. Yet there still seems to be an implicit sense of control and an awareness of death.

Sarah Preston (1982) provides us with a clear example of a good death in an east coast community that includes this awareness. Cree social competence can be seen as the maintaining of a balance between individual autonomy and social responsibility “which allows for effective interaction in one’s social, mental and physical environment” (Preston 1983). An old man was blind but not yet dependent on others and his actions reflected his competence. He was aware of his approaching death, he dressed in his best suit, and

he expressed his respect and concern for those persons closest to him. He said good-bye to his family . . . He expressed his respect as well for those persons he might be expected to meet, who may or may not have been known to him, through his song and through dressing in his best clothes, his suit coat. He went with great equanimity, meeting death as one would meet life. His words understated his emotions, his actions were deliberate. Both were mediated by a quiet reticence and expressed as a strong sense of emotional control, as well as an acute awareness of self and other. (Preston 1982:143)

As Preston goes on to note, this “image of personal strength and competence manifest in the old man’s dying. His ability to balance his personal autonomy with social responsibility made this an “ideal” death.

A good death, then, seems to involve a conscious severing of social relationships. It includes saying goodbye — in actions if not verbally. A good death (and I believe my data substantiate this claim) relies on cognitive control. It cannot be performed by one already disengaged. Perception,
awareness and preparation attest to the dying person's control, his or her competence. Cognitive control calls upon intuition "a very delicately nuanced feeling of subtle relations, both experienced and possible" (Sapir 1949:548), or, for Cree, the feeling or *damatisaen*, when you know something is going to happen.

What is the value of these data? I have presented evidence of various events where, to varying degrees, the dying people were felt to exercise what power they could in the final stages. Even in seemingly tragic deaths, surviving family and friends interpreted the dying person's last actions as meaningful and preparatory. The Cree do not reject death. Referring to one individual who cried at his sister-in-law's funeral, one man told me "even John was crying, even though he knows about the cycle and how he doesn't usually show his feelings, he accepts things, he understands that that's the way things are... These things are meant to be... when you are born you're slated to be here for a certain time, and that's decided then."

What impresses me, however, is that the people I lived with, whether by premonition, intuition, or *damatisaen*, strongly believed that the dying people had some element of control in their final departure from this earth. I decided that it was important enough for presentation and discussion here in light of the often desperate and hopeless analyses of reserve life often depicted in the literature. I was struck when I started reading the literature dealing with contemporary North American Indians how a familiar paradigm appeared over and over, in many forms, patronizingly, benevolently, or with no attempt to hide the racism. Seligman's theory of learned helplessness — that an individual or group's situation is hopeless, for whatever reason, resulting in an overwhelming and unchanging uncontrollability in their lives — while a useful theory, does not provide us with a reflective window into the native world. Too many researchers have gone into reserves and come away with desperate accounts, accounts of hopelessness not so different from that appearing for the institutionalized elderly. The paradigm can be used for, and against, any people who have little or no control over their own powerless lives.

I am not arguing that a hegemony does not exist and that the powerless can necessarily overcome their material reality. What I am trying to understand is why some researchers focus on such despair while, in fact, a rich underlying symbolic system is so clearly in evidence. And it is this belief system which is the key to any form of self-determination.

In 1982, Alan Morinis published an article entitled "The Politics of Self" which looked at Skid Row Indians in Vancouver. Rather than focusing on their conditions which were not too different from those on their reserves, Morinis (1982:103) chose to focus on what he calls their "lifestyle politics... they are the politics of protest". As he sees it, the Skid Row
Indians “reject even the fundamental premises of contemporary, bureaucratic, middle-class culture which the Indian lawyer must master and use in his political dealings with the dominant society. The Skid Row Indians’ protest is more profound” (Morinis 1982:102). The individuals, then, exercise their power by parading their loss of control. It may be useful to think of the alcoholism, suicide, and other self-destructive behaviour as some of the more radical politics of this protest. Such a model is certainly worthy of further consideration. To move from the political to the sacred, what comes to mind is a kind of saintly madman scenario, as when a Tibetan holy man is often seen as a laughing, bumbling idiot.

If people are understood to be able to exercise some power over their death, then they have control over far more than their spiritual world. What I have seen in only the few years I lived in a Cree community was a gradual awakening of an internal and ancient identity, a realization which has been a long time in coming. I am not a linguist and never became conversant in Cree, but I was continually encountering terms which identified abilities or ways which “only existed in the old days a long time ago”, meaning a time before skidoos and government intervention. I would be told about those people from long ago who were miteo, the shaman. The stories abound of miteo being attacked but turning just in time to fight another miteo and avoid death. This was in the time of Joe Trapper’s grandfather, and it is said of him, and many of his time, that they were sort of like miteo, that they had the “sense”. And I am told that this does not happen anymore, that it is a different time now. The old people talk of those who were capable of controlling supernatural forces, kanundahkan, in the old days.

Yet in these days, I hear all sorts of reference to damatisaen and cognitive control occurrences, and I think people talk more openly today about these things than they did even a few years ago. What went underground is resurfacing in a form which provides the people with a strong traditional identity and a pride in the spiritual plane which we may be seeing now increasingly exercised in the political.

Nevertheless, there must always be token acknowledgement of the everyday contingencies that characterize everything in this world. This brings to mind the last scene in the film Little Big Man. Chief Dan George has decided it is time to die and climbs to a spot with Dustin Hoffman. Dan George lays down on his blanket. After a long time he opens his eyes and asks: “Am I dead yet grandson?” Dustin Hoffman says, “No.” Chief Dan George replies: “I was afraid of that . . . sometimes the magic works and sometimes it doesn’t.”
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