

The Heart of Consciousness

Mark Dickinson¹ in conversation with Robert Bringhurst²

In this deep and rich conversation, Mark Dickinson explores questions about literature that require Robert Bringhurst, most famous for bringing the poetic genius of the Haida people to international attention, to draw upon his vast experience in mythopoeia. Mark begins with a seemingly simple question that leads immediately to what we all have to learn from the knowledge traditions of indigenous elders.

Mark: What distinguishes a good reader?

Robert: Good readers, it seems to me, are like good observers of other kinds: good experimental scientists, good naturalists, good listeners, good hunters. They have a deep, persistent interest in the world beyond themselves and in perspectives other than their own. They're ontologically unselfish: not bottled up in themselves, not perpetually needy, not completely at the mercy of their own fears and uncertainties, not helplessly entangled in the fads and paranoid delusions offered to us daily by others of our kind. They aren't predators, inquisitors, litigators, nor party animals either; they just want to hear the music. For good readers, knowledge and understanding are legitimate goals in themselves.

Auden, if we can use him as a benchmark, had plenty of fears and uncertainties, but reading, for him, was a way to get free of them, not an opportunity to inflict them on the world. And he had, like a good scientist, a genuine sense of social responsibility. So he didn't just read and let it go at that. He felt an obligation to think about what he read and then report his findings to the rest of us.

Does a good reader have anything in common with an elder?

The world itself is a pretty good book. A lifetime of reading that book, if you're a good and thoughtful reader, will make you a useful source of advice. So in oral cultures, good readers turn into elders. They don't just get old; they turn into old people who know things that young people don't. It happens here too – but the high-tech, homogenized, literate world is turbid and overcrowded, so pretty much everything in human life that makes ecological sense is harder to see. In the oddball culture we have now – this momentary plankton bloom fed by fossil fuels – even bad readers can live to be a hundred. They can also sometimes get themselves elected prime minister or president. In oral cultures, stupid old people are relatively rare. And selfish, deluded, middle-aged people are relatively rare. In hunter-gatherer cultures, they're rarer still. Not absent altogether, but relatively rare. That's why the term "elder" has such handsome connotations in the Native American world. The underlying assumption – that you have to be fairly smart and pay close attention to live a long time – is just about true.

Speaking of elders, you count Sèdayà of the Yanyèdì, or Elizabeth Nyman (1915–1999), as a teacher. Could you talk about the circumstances of your meeting Sèdayà, how she came across as a human being, and what she taught you?

I met her through a book – actually a manuscript on its way to becoming a book. Jeff Leer, at the Alaska Native Language Center, started to work with her in the early 1980s, taping her stories. It was clear almost from the beginning that these ought to be published, but making that happen was a little bit complex. Too many cooks in the kitchen. I could tell you the story, but then we'd be talking cultural politics instead of human beings. Sèdayà was a charming, highly articulate, highly knowledgeable woman – a good reader of the Taku River landscape if there ever was one – but when I wrote the foreword to her book, in 1992 or thereabouts, I had still never met her in person. I'd heard her stories on tape, read the transcripts of the tapes and Leer's translations, and seen a short videotape that gave me a sense of her hand gestures, but to me she was essentially an author: a voice from the oral world that came to me on paper – like Skaay or Ghandl or Cháálatsoh or, for that matter, Homer, who all died before I was born.

Can the category of "elder" apply to non-human beings? Which ones?

Katy Payne's fine book *Silent Thunder* will tell you how important elders are in African elephant societies. And it will tell you how relentlessly the herds are persecuted now – by humans who are unconstrained by elders of their own. The herds suffer acutely, and may simply disintegrate, when their matriarchs are killed. It's hard not to conclude that African elephants are more civilized and humane than human beings. No poaching rings or Janjaweds or Lord's Resistance Armies, no "final solutions" or suicide bombers, and no Guantánamo Bay. There is fear and anger and violence, sure – and love and elation and mourning – but so far as I've heard, there is none of the orchestrated brutality and industrial-strength venom we've come to expect from human beings. The elephant elders, as I understand, are vital to keeping things cool – vital to interactions with other herds and other species, and also to wise use of resources. They know how to read the world they live in, and how to share what they've learned.

I know I talk too much, but I'd like to give you another example, closer to home. A twenty-minute hike from where I live are a number of Douglas-firs that survived the great Quadra forest fire of 1925. Most of the trees in that valley were killed, but these made it through. We haven't tortured them further by drilling core samples, so we don't know their ages exactly, but several have to be more than 600 years old. The oldest might be 800. Standing among those trees is quite a lot like sitting with the elders at Wāwākapewin or Kwanlin Dün or 'Ooljéé'tó.

Between species as different as humans and Douglas-firs, there might be very few words, or no words, exchanged. The words, if any, will also probably be in a language only the speaker, not the hearer, understands. So they turn into gestures, like waving and smiling. Not language but the base material out of which language is made. Still, if you spend any time alone with those trees, and you know how to listen, something will happen. I'm happy, myself, to call it communication. Very imperfect and incomplete communication, but it's always, for me, a rewarding way to spend time.

Most card-carrying linguists will snort at the idea of trees having language, but botanists, geneticists, and foresters are starting to come round to the idea. They're even starting to decode some of what trees say to each other. That's a far cry from hearing them speak and grasping their meaning directly, but it's a step in the right direction.

And what's in it for the trees? What's in it for them is not being burned and not being logged. Will they learn Kwakwala or Haida or English? No – and that's fine. Interspecies communication is routinely sublinguistic. That is, it doesn't normally rely on either species learning the language of the other. Just on their knowing that someone is there.

Does the land know we're here?

I take you to mean the whole land, with the entirety of what lives in it, not just the rocks and the inorganic parts of the dirt. And if that's what you mean, then we're part of the land ourselves, or we should be. Do *we* know we're here? Maybe we know, as Descartes said, that we exist, but do we know where and in what context we exist? Do we know where *here* is? If we don't know we're here, right here, is it someone else's job to know that for us? The land, I think, has other, more important things to think about than us. So my inclination is to say, No, the land probably doesn't know we're here unless we know that fact ourselves. Which mostly we don't.

What is a tree?

That's something only a tree could answer – and I imagine different trees would answer differently. In human terms, *tree* is a very big category, not taxonomically coherent. A botanist will tell you that a tree is any big woody plant, belonging to any one of maybe 60,000 species in thousands of genera, hundreds of families, dozens of orders, several classes and divisions. I'm guessing that's not how it looks to the tree. Maybe a tree would say, "A tree is any creature in which I can recognize something like myself: something that grew from a tiny seed or spore in the earth and came to tower over other vegetation."

Or maybe the tree would say, "Wood." Wood is quite magical stuff, even when dead. When it's alive, it's more magical yet. We could talk all day about wood. But for thousands of years, humans have separated little woody plants – shrubs, which we look down on or across at – from the big ones we look up to and call trees. That's blatantly anthropocentric, and a tree might say it's nonsense. A tree might say that woodiness, not size, is the crucial factor. Or maybe it would say, "A tree is part of a forest," and leave it at that.

How do you experience the forest?

There's no place on the planet that I've ever been happier than in the high subalpine forests of the Coast Range, the Sierra, the Cascades. In those places, just below treeline, the forest is short, sparse, full of open spaces. It's barely a forest at all – but being there, for me, is like being in one of those Renaissance paintings where humans and gods are permitted to mingle on equal terms. No place has ever seemed to me more numinous. I'd stay there if I could – but humans can't stay in such

places for long without wrecking them. To live in that country, unless you're a tree, you have to keep moving.

But there are lots of different forests, as there are lots of different trees. I live now at 100 m elevation, surrounded by rainforest: Doug-fir and hemlock, Sitka spruce and grand fir, shore pine, red cedar, red alder, and maple. It's dense, and it's tall. The biggest trees are 500 times larger than I am, and ten times older. Even the youngsters, those my own age, are fifty or eighty times my size. I walk in this forest every day, and I know it to be a genuine civilization – in fact, an exemplary civilization. It's peaceful, rich, resilient, and creative. I'm dwarfed by it and made larger by it both at the same time. It does what all real civilizations do: enlarges the minds and enriches the lives of those who come into it. So I've learned to depend on it. It's become a crucial part of what I think with, just like the books on my library shelves.

How does the forest help you think?

I don't want to quibble, but putting it that way makes me slightly uncomfortable. I don't think it gives the forest enough credit.

The forest itself is a big brain. All those trunks, roots, and branches are living, breathing neurons. You and I are so tiny we can walk right into that brain, like a gnat flying in and out of an elephant's ear. I can walk inside that big green brain and feel it thinking all around me – and of course that helps me think. But it might be a little more accurate to say *I help myself* to the intellectual depth and sanity of the forest. Of which there is plenty.

The internal electrochemical impulses in vascular plants are five to ten thousand times slower than in mammals. You might think that means trees are a whole lot stupider than squirrels, wolves, and humans, but speed isn't everything. This forest is – what? a million times bigger than the brain inside my head? ten million times? So it could be ten thousand times slower – or a million times slower – and still have the edge. In any case, for some purposes, slower may be smarter rather than stupider.

Passing one brain through the inside of another sounds like a pretty neat trick, but it's what happens in the forest all day long. For the ravens, the pileated woodpeckers, the black bears, and the butterflies, it's routine. The big green brain of the forest is the complex thing it is because those other brains are part of it. If this sounds mystical, I'd say it's also as real and practical as the process of induction in an electrical transformer. Pass one circuit through the field of another and there will be a transfer of electromotive force.

Putting one brain into the forcefield of another can also be a recipe for disaster. People caught up in crowds, or conned by the charm of a

charlatan or the fantasies of a demagogue or dictator, routinely lose their wits and do things no sane person would approve. But the forest isn't a crowd; it's a civilization – a leaderless, wild civilization of a kind that has thrived on earth since long before there were any humans. Besides that, the forest has roots, while mammals have legs. And the forest is inherently, insistently diverse. It's made of many species in a way that you and I and our institutions and governments are not. (I'm not forgetting that we, like the forest, have other creatures living within us and would die if they got up and left – but still we're a single species reliant on others; the forest is not.) So the forest is more or less guaranteed to think differently than I do and to know many things I don't. Which I think means it will always have plenty to teach me.

Did Skaay and Ghandl understand the world around them in terms of a comparable interpenetration of minds?

If I had to give a really short answer, I'd settle for "yes and no." Skaay and Ghandl belonged to a society in which normal people took what they needed from the forest but otherwise spent very little time there. Except for a few reclusive shamans, everybody lived in beachfront villages, got almost all their food from the sea, and regarded the saltwater canoe as the only important means of travel. So I think it's safe to say the traditional Haida attitude toward the forest was different from the one I've acquired by spending time in it every day. Skaay, however, was more than a little interested in shamans, including the ones who hung out in the forest. He says much more about the forest than any other Haida mythteller. He also says more about minds. He and Ghandl both have stories about the mental powers required for travelling in unfamiliar realms – sea and sky and forest. Losing your wits is a frequent theme – and it always turns out you haven't just lost them; they've been stolen. I don't think we should call this interpenetration of minds.

On the other hand, a constant theme in Haida oral literature – and Haida visual art as well – is the interpenetration of bodies. You become something else by putting on someone else's skin, or by stepping out of a skin that you normally wear. Skaay and Ghandl have powerful stories on this theme too. It's a very hunterly vision – metaphorically a long way from Faraday's law of induction – but these interpenetrating bodies are very much alive. They have minds of their own – and that's the point. In the mythworld, everything is alive. And if two bodies occupy the same space, their minds will be doing the same.

What is a shaman?

You have a fondness for unanswerable questions. A shaman is a person who does what shamans do. What shamans do is cross a boundary – one that the rest of us know is there but don't know how to cross ourselves – and then, with any luck, the shamans come back again and tell us what they found.

Some of the very best accounts of shamanic activity I've seen are part of the canon of Haida oral literature. The authors of these accounts – Skaay, Ghandl, Kilxhawgins, Kingagwaaw – weren't, so far as we know, shamans themselves, but they knew people who were. And they were very astute observers. This matters because, now, almost anywhere you go, church and state have done everything in their power to break the shamanic profession and hound it out of existence, while popular curiosity and plain old gullibility and neediness have done everything they could to bring it back. So real shamans, where they exist, are now methodically invisible, and fake shamans work openly in their place.

Another reason it matters is that nineteenth-century Haida shamanism, as Skaay and Kilxhawgins describe it, was a comparatively healthy cultural phenomenon. They give no hint of the organized (or disorganized) malevolence that often crops up in accounts of shamans elsewhere in the world. Of course, it's hard to know how far these accounts of shamanic malevolence can be taken at face value, and to what extent they might be just reflections of missionary paranoia. At any rate, there are a lot of them. The Haida accounts, by contrast, are clear, detailed, and free of any nervous backward glance.

So there's one way of pursuing your question. You can't just go hang out with shamans the way you can go hang out with trees. Nor can you read some shaman's book on the major types of trances, or trust an anthropologist's biography of a shaman. But you can let those Haida authors – three mythtellers and one oral historian – tell you what they learned by living in the wreckage of a rich, old oral culture.

Some of the Haida stories about shamans are, in a manner of speaking, "fiction." That is, they are told as part of the unfolding of a set of literary themes. That gives the mythteller a chance to say what he knows without appearing to transgress the public, impersonal, timeless nature of the mythteller's art. What he's doing is not in fact impersonal, any more than writing a novel or play is impersonal, but it's presented as if it were. And some of the stories appear to be "nonfiction" accounts of events the speaker has seen or persons he's known. This again may be, and almost certainly is, a literary device, but it's a different device from mythtelling. Either way, the meat on this literary bone is knowledge the storyteller has picked up somewhere in his life and has, with the help of the story, polished until it shines.

Can we add polyphony to the list of "telltale marks of oral style" you mention elsewhere?

Ah! A question with a clear, straightforward answer! No, we can't.

Polyphony seems to me a fundamental characteristic of reality. To the extent that oral literature, or any other art, represents or re-enacts reality, you might think it would have to be polyphonic too – but that's not the way it works. Artists can – and of course, they must – leave a lot of things out. All of us understand reality to be spatial and dynamic, but a lot of very fine representations and re-enactments of reality are two-dimensional and static. A painting or drawing doesn't need to become a movie in order to better represent reality.

In a conceptual rather than practical sense, I'd say all genuine *mythologies* are polyphonic, because a mythology is an ecology of stories: a web of many different, coexisting stories. Polyphony as an abstract notion is almost synonymous with ecology, but in the practical sense, of course, they're very different. You can't catch fish in a motet.

When a mythology has the misfortune to turn into a religion – Christianity or Islam or the United States of America, for example – one story comes to dominate the others and they cease to be polyphonic. But even in a thriving oral culture where the mythology is a healthy forest of stories, the stories are usually told one at a time, not several at once. So there might be no perceptible polyphony in a myhtelling performance. In the Ifugao villages in Luzon, it used to be the custom to tell many stories at once – but that's the exception, not the rule.

Hold on a second. A few minutes ago, you were talking about the interpenetration of minds and bodies, and of passing one brain through another. Isn't that a kind of polyphony? The analogy to overlapping melodic lines in polyphonic music seems strong.

The forest is full of independent voices. So what you'll hear as you pass through the forest will be polyphonic speech, or polyphonic music. But if you come back to the house and tell me about it, your account of what you heard might take the form of a list: I heard ravens, pileated woodpeckers, hairy woodpeckers, downy woodpeckers, blue grouse, ruby-crowned kinglets, winter wrens, running water, red squirrels.... There's nothing polyphonic about your list, although it might be in its way a faithful record of your polyphonic experience. Am I being opaque?

Hardly. Maybe orthodox, though. Aren't there numerous examples of a kind of polyphonic consciousness in Skaay's stories? The encounter with Crazy God in "Raven Traveling," for example, who appears in two places at once. The figure of

the Sea Wolf, who from Daxhiigang's graphite sketch seems to consist of multiple consciousnesses in one body. The echoing of entire passages, almost verbatim, between "Standing Traveller" and "Spirit Being Going Naked." Mysterious voices emanating from Chilkat blankets and the heads of inlets. Layers of reality stacked like musical staves. The interweaving of multiple narrative through-lines like voices in a motet. None of this counts as polyphonic?

I agree with you. Skaay understands that a lot of different things are happening at once, and he brings that awareness into his work. That doesn't mean polyphony is a standard feature of oral style. Skaay isn't your typical oral storyteller anymore than J. S. Bach is your typical average European composer.

Oral poets routinely portray the world as a multilayered place, but they usually do this through a single narrative line. Somebody – could be Odysseus or Cuchulain or a nameless young bird hunter – travels from one world to another and then comes back again – or doesn't. This is like *modulation* in music: moving from one key to another to another. In polyphonic music, different lines, creating different musical spaces, are sounded simultaneously, not sequentially. That's not an easy thing to do with a single voice, but Bach and Skaay knew how to do it.

The musicologists don't seem to have a settled name for this kind of polyphony: the kind that's created by allowing a single voice to dance rapidly back and forth between different voices. People have called it implied polyphony, metaphorical polyphony, simulated polyphony. It deserves a proper name. Bach was not the first to do it, but he did it very convincingly, and repeatedly, in the suites for solo cello and the sonatas and partitas for solo violin. In the twentieth century, when Bach's reputation had been rescued from the shadows, practically everybody who wrote serious music for solo cello set out to do it too. So you find it in Kodály, in Cassadó, in Britten. Even so, it's a long way from being normal procedure in European chamber music. Most composers, if they want to write polyphonically, will write for a polyphonic instrument: the piano or the string quartet, for instance.

It would be wonderful to have this kind of historical perspective on Haida oral poetry – or any oral tradition anywhere – but we don't. We never do. Was Skaay one of a long line of Haida mythtellers skilled at implied polyphony? Maybe. But all we can do is compare him with the few other Haida mythtellers on record, and with others in other traditions. When I do that, I come to the conclusion that Skaay is truly remarkable.

And Ghandl?

Skaay and Ghandl are about as different as two good mythtellers can be. They spoke the same language, lived in the same archipelago, and overlapped in time, but they're as different in interest and temperament as ... what? Bach and Schubert, perhaps, or Michelangelo and Botticelli. It floors me that people could lump them together as nameless spokesmen for Haida tradition, but many people did exactly that, and some still do.

We only know what they were like in a single sliver of their lives: the fall of 1900, when John Swanton took dictation from them both. Ghandl was roughly 50. Skaay was maybe the same age I am now, 72, or a few years older. The old man was crippled with age (which, knock on wood, I'm not); the younger was blind and had been since childhood. Neither could do what most Haida men did, which was fishing, hunting, and carpentry. But both could tell stories that would take the top of your head off.

Skaay had large and complex visions, and a delicate, incisive sense of character. His stories went on for days. Ghandl's went on for an hour or less, but they were lyrical, clear, and deep, where Skaay's were multilayered and tightly interwoven. And both of them lived in the oral world, where everything perishes. To have a substantial body of work from them both, in Swanton's careful transcriptions, and to know their names besides, is a breathtaking gift, like having the music of Schubert and Bach.

Let me drag another one of your elective grandparents into this. What about Titian and The Flaying of Marsyas? There's a whole ecology of spirit beings, personalities, body parts, colours and meanings placed in relationship with one another. Given that the whole canvas is spread out in front of you, it can be apprehended in a single moment of time, as a simultaneity. Is that a kind of polyphony? Do Titian and Skaay share a similar polyphonic consciousness?

It's a wonderful painting, alright – and I'd say there is something polyphonic about it, though not quite for the reasons you suggest. You don't get polyphony in visual art by painting a crowd of figures, or a crowd of arms and legs, anymore than you get polyphony in music by writing a crowd of notes. You get polyphony by superimposing what I want to call stories, or trajectories of meaning. Polyphony isn't like a flock of birds; it's like two or more birds, or flocks of birds, going independently about their own agendas in shared perceptual space, leaving just the right amount of room for one another. So you get two independent stories bounded by the same frame, bathed in the same light.

And I think it works like this. In music, which is a temporal art, layering stories in this way creates a powerful impression of enlarged and layered space. In a spatial art, like painting, it seems to expand and layer time.

Titian's teacher, Giovanni Bellini, does it in the *St Francis*. One set of figures – the donkey, the heron, the rabbit, the shepherd and his sheep – is wholly immersed in the everyday world. Another figure, St Francis, painted in the same colours, breathing the same air, is receiving the stigmata. These two quite different events, each in its own kind of time – or one in time and one outside of time – unfold in the same moment, all in the same space, and with the same kind of natural grace. In Titian's *Marsyas*, Apollo and his helpers are flaying the satyr alive, and Midas, who rendered the judgement, is watching this occur – but Midas' face is Titian's self-portrait. The painter is there in the painting seeing the vision that he has painted. And those are Titian's dogs, not Apollo's dogs or Midas' dogs, lapping up the blood. Myth time and historical time are turning the same clock.

Am I wrong to infer from New World Suite No. 3 and Ursa Major that it is also possible to superimpose different mythworlds on top of one another? Is there room enough in the mind for that kind of complexity?

It seems quite possible to me. And not just possible – essential. You and I are living in a time and place where different mythworlds do in fact intersect, and have been intersecting for centuries now. Denying this fact has produced disaster. Pretending that colonial mythologies are going to conquer and displace indigenous mythologies, or reduce them to the status of dime-store souvenirs, has brought us to the brink of planetary destruction. Is there room in the mind, and in art, for a bigger and better vision than that? Of course there is. But there are also lots of small and selfish minds that want nothing to do with it.

Do contemporary identity politics, in your view, embrace polyphonic complexity and live up to that "bigger and more sustainable vision"?

Genuine politics require that you rise above your personal identity, not wave it like a flag. To be politically responsible, you have to ask what's good for the *polis*; you have to think and act on behalf of the whole community of beings. Elders do this daily. It's their job. It ought to be everybody else's job too, insofar as everybody else is an elder-in-training. Identity politicians tend to do the opposite. Their kind of politics is a contradiction in terms: small-mindedness substituted for large-

mindedness, on the theory that this will right historical wrongs. It won't. The result is cacophony, not polyphony.

Is that a picture of Martin Heidegger on your shelf? What's he doing there?

It is. Heidegger in the Black Forest, wearing a sort of skull cap and, for some reason, a necktie, standing in front of his cabin. The fellow sitting beside him, in the other photo, bent over a really old laptop, is Pythagoras, carved in limestone over one of the side doors at the main entrance to Chartres. Pythagoras looks happily absorbed in whatever it is he's working on, but Heidegger is scowling. What he's doing there is reminding me that a man can be incredibly insightful and also blind and full of blatant self-deception all at the same time.

Was Heidegger not, in his own way, an exemplar of polyphonic consciousness?

Heidegger was many things, but one of the things he was most persistently is an anthropocentric metaphysician. If your notions of being and value put humans at the centre, you are probably a homophonic thinker, not a polyphonic one. But let's remember, these are descriptive terms, not value judgements. Lots of the finest chamber music ever written – lots of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Fauré, and lots of Bach as well – is not polyphonic. Lots of fine poetry and painting is not polyphonic. And lots of fine thinking is not polyphonic either.

*And yet at the very centre of Heidegger's philosophy is a vision of interpenetrating planes of being, of a human existence nested inside an infinitely larger existence, of superimposed trajectories of meaning, of a mode of thinking that emulates the layering of the forest and the footpaths that wander through it. Despite the anthropocentrism that wildly distorts this vision, all of the above seems consistent with what we've been calling "polyphonic consciousness." You wouldn't have called your book of translations of Skaay *Being in Being* were it not for Heidegger, no?*

That's a generous reading of Heidegger, and I don't want to quarrel with generosity. But let me just tell you how my own reading of Heidegger unfolded. What drew me to him first was the close attention he paid to the Presocratics and to Sophocles. Then I read his essays on art and poetry, and I went through a phase of Heideggerian rapture, quoting him right and left. As I continued to read, I came across more and more passages in which human beings are accorded a metaphysically privileged position, and passages in which human language – the Greek and German languages in particular – are treated as metaphysically

privileged vehicles of meaning. In other words, I kept finding that this probing student of the early Greeks, who said more to me than any other philosopher about the nature of art and poetry, was also an anthropocentric romantic. And to me as a practising linguist, much of what Heidegger says about language just seems like poppycock.

Anybody can, and everybody does, make political mistakes, but I think that to qualify as a philosopher, or a useful thinker of any kind, you have to be able to learn from your mistakes. Heidegger's long involvement with the Nazis, and his refusal to disown them even after the War was over, reinforces my sense that he was after something philosophy cannot supply. I'm afraid what he really wanted was a cosmologically grounded hierarchy that assured a privileged place for him and his kind. In other words, that what he wanted from philosophy was a substitute for the Church.

As for the title of Skaay's book, I don't know whether Heidegger had anything to do with it. There was a time in my life when the word "being" automatically brought Heidegger to mind, but when I started working seriously on Haida, that time was already past. On the cover of Skaay's book is a picture of a broken rattle. George Emmons, the ethnographer who sold it to the American Museum in the 1890s, described it as "one spirit within another, both singing." When I first saw a photo of that rattle, I thought it had an awful lot in common with Skaay's vision of the world. When I held the real thing in my hand, deep in a storage vault in New York, I thought so even more. So I decided to put the rattle on the cover of Skaay's book, and the title grew out of the rattle. The publisher groaned and said the phrase was too metaphysical, but no one came up with anything better.

Perhaps the term "polyphonic consciousness" is being stretched in too many ways here. Can I ask you to define "polyphonic consciousness" and give me a sense of its key attributes, so far as you understand them?

Wasn't it you who introduced that phrase into the discussion? I'll take the rap for polyphony *per se*; it's been a hobbyhorse of mine for thirty years; but I, of course, borrowed the word from the musicians, and I've tried never to use it in a way that would be faithless to its origins. So polyphony to me is first of all a precisely identifiable characteristic of certain musical compositions, or parts of compositions, and by extension also certain poems and plays, paintings and sculptures, and so on.

I've introduced polyphony into my own work in a very literal way, by writing multiple texts for multiple voices who speak at the same time in the same place but don't say the same thing. Many people think this is a stunt, and some people misunderstand it as a form of dialogue.

But the reason it interests me as a musical and literary technique is that I'm quite sure it models a fundamental characteristic of reality. Musicians didn't invent it; they *discovered* it. And they've discovered it over and over, in different times and places: Europe, Central Africa, India, Indonesia, the Canadian arctic.

I don't in fact remember ever using the phrase *polyphonic consciousness*, but maybe I'm forgetting. I don't know what it could mean except awareness that polyphony is intrinsic to the world, or that the structure of what's real is inherently polyphonic. I associate that kind of awareness with Native American culture generally, but outside of Haida and Tlingit sculpture, polyphony is not a common feature of Native American art. That doesn't bother me in itself. How people see reality and how they represent it in art are frequently quite different. Artists use the languages they inherit – narrative languages, visual languages, musical languages – and language is different from thought.

But now we have a problem, or *I* have a problem. I borrowed the word *polyphony* from musicians, and out of respect for those musicians and their craft, I don't want to carry the term across the mountain and claim it's mine alone. I don't want to use it in a way that would baffle the people I got it from. It seems to me the phrase *polyphonic consciousness* risks doing exactly that. And if we use it to talk about people who have little or no connection to any tradition of polyphonic music, we also risk putting pegs into holes they don't fit. So my impulse here is to look for an alternate term or an alternate metaphor. Forest consciousness, for instance. Would that suit you?

Given our surroundings, sure, call it forest consciousness. Seems disrespectful to suggest otherwise. So long as we don't call it that when we're at the seashore, above the treeline, at either pole, snorkeling over a coral reef, or in the desert. Hmmm ... there's a thought ... no single label for polyphonic consciousness is appropriate – including "polyphonic consciousness" – because it may well be a place-based phenomenon, and places themselves differ dramatically. The kinds of thought-fields they generate depend on the nonhuman beings and processes found there. Hence Heriot Ridge consciousness, Qquuna consciousness, Nogojiwanong consciousness, and so on. And each place-mind is a node in a much larger regional mind, which is itself a node in an even bigger mind – just like the boxes nested inside of one another that the old man opens for the Raven in Skaay's Raven Travelling. I might have gone off the rails here, though. Does this make any sense?

Circuits within circuits, places within places, boxes within boxes – that's one way of saying what's involved in being a mind.

Well then, what are some of the key attributes of this kind of consciousness, as you understand it?

I wouldn't want to suggest that it's the same for everybody – nor even that it's the same, for any one person, as one day or season flows into the next. And I'd like to insist on what I said earlier, and what you just said too: no two forests are the same. So there is no simple answer. But maybe we can still sketch in some basics.

Awareness first of all that the forest is alive and it's intelligent, not a bunch of tall weeds waiting for the mower, not a mindless and obedient resource. Awareness that you're surrounded by something much bigger and more varied than you are, and that you have to stay alert in order to keep up. Awareness that what's there is not a single entity, to be dealt with once and for all, but many independent beings, with whom you have a moral obligation to continue to negotiate. If you take them for granted, you're finished. Equally, if you pander and debase yourself, you're finished. An awareness, therefore, that you have to be honest about what your needs are, to know what your own weight is and pull it. To enter into the mind of the forest, you have to know what you cost.

And then you have to avoid Heidegger's error. You have to avoid constructing a picture of the world intended to prove that whatever you cost, you're worth it.

What does it mean to know what you cost?

One thing it doesn't mean is trying to measure your impact in dollars and cents. The forest is an ecology, not a currency union. But an ecology is an economy – and all non-delusory economies are ecologies. An ecology is a system in which food and other necessities get made and traded, shared and stored. Knowing what you cost means understanding what effect your presence has on everything else. So it means knowing in principle whether your presence is sustainable. To *belong* in an ecology, you have to give as much as you take, and to give things your fellow creatures need, and to take things they can spare. That doesn't mean no pain, no death, no tragedy. It means the pain, death, and tragedy come in a package with life, beauty, and joy, and that this goes on and on, constantly changing. Ecologies aren't immortal, but an ecology does have a life – and life has shape and duration.

A resource-extraction economy, by contrast, is phony by definition. No matter whether the resource is coal or copper or diamonds, lumber or buffalo bone or peat moss, things are taken rather than made in such a system, and little or nothing is given back that anyone needs. When things are taken rather than made, and no giving takes place in

return, there are no essential constraints on how much is taken. Then what you have is a pirate raid and a spending spree, not an economy, even if it lasts for a thousand years. If you live that way, you're unlikely to know what you cost, yet the fact will be clear: you cost too much.

If you subscribe to a religion that claims God made the world expressly for you, and you're welcome to take what you please from the candy store of creation, then you can't even ask what you cost, much less answer the question. And that, I suppose, is why the pussy-grabbing president, Donald Trump, has the support of the Christian right as well as Hell's Angels. He doesn't pretend to read the Bible or pray or go to church, but he embodies the first article of faith: God made the world for us; we are the pinnacle of creation. If that's what you think, you can also think you cost nothing. Or you can think that whatever you cost, God is happy to pay. But you will be wrong.

A few minutes ago, you said that language is different from thought. Could you clarify that remark?

I don't know, but I'll give it a try. A lot of people – Marx, for one – have claimed that there is no thought without human language. Some others – Einstein, for one – have laughed at that idea. I'm with the laughers. The thinking in Titian's *Flaying of Marsyas*, or the Special Theory of Relativity, or Beethoven's late string quartets, or the Pazzi Chapel, is clearly nonverbal, but I have no doubt it's genuine thinking. A lot of the thinking involved in staging King Lear is also nonverbal, though it's wrapped around an armature of words. I think that armature of words is mostly wrapped, in its turn, on a nonverbal core.

Many mental operations that *are* essentially verbal – the repetition of slogans and fixed opinions and prejudicial judgements, for example – are not thinking at all. So it seems to me that language and thought overlap, but the overlap is complex and often counterproductive. Humans *can* think with language, and for some kinds of thinking, language is essential, but it's far from the only means of thinking. Language also seems to be the main thing humans use as a *substitute* for thinking. Often it functions as a scarecrow: verbal straw gussied up to look like thinking.

Serious thinking is hard work, like mountaineering. Not everybody enjoys it, and not everybody is good at it. But many people who might never go into the mountains alone will eagerly go on a guided trek. That also happens in the mountains of the mind. Some people sit in the chalet and admire the view, some go on guided treks, and a few go out alone, into the blank space on the map, to see what's there. The guided treks often take the form of books. People follow the author's

thinking by walking a trail of words. Other people become guides by vocation and spend their lives building those trails of words. So guides and clients alike may get the idea that the words themselves are the thinking. But a trail isn't a mountain range, and a mountain range isn't a trail.

We could chase this metaphor further, but maybe it's better to let it go.

Is there a place for metaphor and gestalt in forest consciousness?

It's hard for me to imagine any kind of consciousness that doesn't involve gestalts – that is, the apprehension of complex things as wholes, without breaking them down or building them up out of parts. I'd like to say the same thing about metaphor – that it occurs wherever consciousness occurs – but first we'd have to agree on what metaphor means. If metaphor is merely a feature of language – if it's *saying* A is B – then I guess it occurs only where people are using words. If metaphor is *seeing* that A is B, then it isn't dependent on language; language is just a handy way of pointing the metaphor out.

I and almost everyone I know was taught in school that metaphors are purely linguistic manoeuvres. I don't know why, but it took me a long time to see how wrong this teaching is. Defining metaphor, simile, and metonymy as figures of speech, instead of figures of thought, now seems to me ridiculous. I find it as laughable as the claim that thought is just a way of using language. Thought is a basic biological process, like digestion and respiration. It's a process to which language can contribute, and which language can also impede. And metaphor, I think, is a basic operation in the grammar of thought itself.

Analytical thought, which eschews gestalts and metaphors, seems to me a late arrival on the mental landscape, in the same way that prose is a late arrival in literature. Prose hardly exists until writing exists: until language is caught, trapped, and becomes a thing you can look at and poke with a stick. And analytical thinking is thoroughly prosaic. People who try to confine themselves entirely to analytical thinking are, in my view, fencing themselves out of the heart of consciousness – just as people who write (or read) nothing but analytical prose are shutting themselves out of the heart of language.

Let me follow up on the notion of thought as a basic biological process, as I think you called it a moment ago. Sèdayà, if I remember rightly, said that the river knows "what happened to you in your past" and will tell you who you are if you are willing to listen. Is she suggesting that by spending time with the patterned

intelligence of an ecosystem we can come to a better understanding of the patterns that make up our own lives?

Yes, that's a wonderful passage. But remember, she isn't talking, as writers do, to some unknown and unknowable reader. She's talking to Jeff Leer, her adopted nephew, and she says, *axh tuwâ sigû yisatîní / yá i shagûn*, "I want you to see / your *shagûn* here." That is, "I want you to see your story, your roots; I want you to see where you come from." Then she says – I'll have to get the book to quote this correctly; hang on a minute... Yes, she says, *ch'u wé uhân i tlâ ch'u t yisikurwu à*. This means something like, "Back there among us, you still don't know your mother." Leer is a white guy, but he speaks good Tlingit, and he is Sèdayà's adoptive nephew. So he has a notional Tlingit mother but not an actual one. In that respect, he's a lot like Sèdayà herself, whose mother died when she was an infant. She says to him, in effect, "You don't know your own mother – at least not the mother who matters to us." And then: *ch'a tdakât gaghisakû yá T'âkhûdâxh*, "you can learn all of it from the Taku." I take this to mean, basically, "everything your mother might have taught you, you can learn from the river instead." To me, that's a breathtaking line.

You've read her book – which is still the only single-author book in the Tlingit language – so you know that, for her, the Taku country wasn't just a succession of landforms; it was an enormous library shelf, a living body of oral literature: her *shagûn* and the *shagûn* of all her relations. It's too late to ask her, but I think she might say – if she were comfortable using your words – that the patterns of that ecosystem are and ought to be the patterns of the lives of those who live there – and that if you forget what those patterns are, you can always go back to the river and ask.

Is that how those of us who are rootless – regardless of ethnicity – can come home to ourselves and the places that host us, however begrudgingly? By humbling ourselves and simply asking the landforms around us for help?

That's a pretty big question. Can we walk along the edge of it for a minute before we dive in?

Maybe a small dose of analytical language would also be useful, like a spoonful of castor oil. There's no cure for rootlessness in mammals like you and me, just as there's no cure for rootedness in trees. Rootlessness is our condition. But mammals have territories. We can call those territories roots; it's a lovely metaphor – but that doesn't make us into trees. Mammals not only *can* move; they have to move. Many have more than one territory. None of them sit in one place all the time like barnacles or coral, and I don't believe any mammals like being

imprisoned. But some of us certainly like having houses – and some of us have a strong preference for building our own houses rather than buying them off the shelf or living in refugee camps or motel rooms. Mammals – primates especially, like us – are also social animals, who share their lives with others. That’s another sense in which creatures like us can have roots.

Sèdayà was a Yanyèdishâ, a woman of the Yanyèdí clan, the lineage of the people who built *Yán Hít*, Hemlock House. *Yán* is either kind of hemlock: mountain hemlock or western hemlock. They grow side by side on the Taku. Physical houses don’t last very long in that country, and people have to move, so there is no original Hemlock House. *Yán Hít* is an idea rather than a structure. It could be *represented* by a structure – any number of structures – but the structures wouldn’t last the way the idea has. Sèdayà’s roots were in her knowledge of the land, her understanding of how to find and make whatever she needed, and how to get along with other people, who (sometimes anyway) made one another’s survival more likely. This knowledge, this wisdom, kept forming and reforming into stories, and the stories were mapped onto the land. So the stories also had roots, though stories, like storytellers, can move and probably have to.

She does mention asking landforms for help – but not as a general strategy. It’s something to do when you’re taking a risk. You don’t just stand in front of the mountain and say, “Help me” or “Feed me” or “Take care of me.” But in a slippery spot, high on the side of the valley, you might say, *Lít x’wán khâkhwxh xhat wunikh, lítk’w*. Leer translates this as “Don’t let anything bad happen to me, grandfather.” That’s nice; very idiomatic – but when you address a mountain as *lítk’w*, you aren’t specifying its gender. *Lítk’w* means both grandfather and grandmother.

Sèdayà, when I finally met her, was a deeply respected elder, but there were still people who talked behind her back – beside her face, *khà yat’ênáxh*, you would say in Tlingit. She never forgot, and some others never forgot, that she’d been an orphan, and orphans were treated as one step up from slaves. Telling Leer about her life, she repeated what her fiancé’s mother had said to her not long before her marriage: *De ch’a yê yatì ch’u ch’âkw ch’u hà shagûndáxh, / wâ yatìyi à kuhànkî yaxh wùwagùdán / wâ yatìyi à áwé tlêk’*: “That’s the way it’s done, from way back in our *shagûn*, / some orphans make it through, / and some don’t.” *Kuhànkî*, the Tlingit word for orphan, actually means “not adopted” or “not brought up.” The verb *hàn* means to adopt or to raise or to stand something up. It also means to stand *yourself* up. Sèdayà had to do that for herself: stand herself up, because her elders didn’t teach her as eagerly and generously as they might have. She explains, politely, to Leer, that even though he’s been formally adopted, he also has a lot to learn. He should stand himself

up, she says – by reading all the unwritten books that are imprinted, by the power of thought and memory, on the Taku River valley.

Just about all of us are orphans now, and ritual adoption won't change that. But we can try, at least, to follow Sèdayà's example and stand ourselves up. I don't know that "asking the landforms for help" is exactly the way to go about it, but spending a lot of time with mountains, rivers, forests, and all the creatures who live there – learning how intelligent and interrelated they are – would be a fine way to start.

If all you have is the land – if that's your only *kítk'w*, your only grandparent – then you're really starting over again from scratch. The stories will be out of earshot. But for a lot of North America, there are other important resources. There are people like Sèdayà, who know things and will teach you what they can. And there are the books: printed books, in which voices like Sèdayà's and Ghandl's and Skaay's have been transcribed. The voices in those books fit together – polyphonically – with the landforms. So the voices and the landforms illuminate each other. And they can teach you a lot of the things that cultural orphans don't otherwise get taught.

That's a big thought. Can you help me understand how the voices in those books might fit together polyphonically with the landforms around us? Are there any specific examples in your own experience that come to mind?

Let's stay a moment longer with Sèdayà. The first story in her book concerns a couple of creatures she calls *khudzitiyi át*. "Giants" is the usual English translation, but there's nothing in the Tlingit phrase that suggests gargantuan size. The phrase means something like "primeval forces" or "elemental beings." Anyway, these two characters disagree about who owns the country. One of them tears the other one's head off, rips out his heart and his windpipe, and throws his severed head across the river. Then the victor moves down toward the river mouth and settles there. Both these giants are now mountains, but just out of sight of one another. The giant who lost the battle is now, in fact, two mountains – torso on the east side of the river, head on the west. His throat is now a waterfall, and his heart is part of the river channel itself.

As a work of literature, Sèdayà's telling of the story doesn't amount to a heck of a lot. That is, she didn't develop it as she might have. It's also full of slips and false starts, which suggests that when she dictated it she was preoccupied with something else. Even so, if you read the story *in situ*, on the lower Taku, you'll find it a very vivid piece of imaginative geology. After that, you can start to hear the story through the power of the landscape, and the story can start to do its work. But it

can only do its work if you stay there on the river, or return to it year after year – in memory or in the flesh.

Two *khudzitiyi át* – two Titans, two gods, two primeval forces – fought over a landscape that no one had ever seen: a land that didn't yet exist because they hadn't yet created it out of themselves. One of them beat the other, and the result was the same for them both: they became the thing they'd been fighting about and have lived in relative peace there ever since. If you take this as a just-so story that explains how some mountains got their shapes, you've missed what it has to offer you. But if you start to rub shoulders with those mountains, and then find yourself thinking about fighting and where it can get you, then you'll find the story has some depth.

That makes me think about the passage from Technology and Empire when George Grant says that we might go into the mountains and sense the presence of gods, but that they are the gods of another race and we cannot know them because of "who we are and what we did." Sèdayà, in her generosity, seems to be suggesting that even non-natives might be able to manifest themselves to the gods as theirs. Yet if an interlocutor from identity politics were to wander in at this point in our conversation, they might cite this as yet another example of non-natives appropriating indigenous spirituality. How would you respond?

I have very fond memories of George Grant, and great respect for him too – but that nonsense about "gods of another race" is just bad Sunday School recycled. The Old Testament obsession with *our God versus your gods* is every bit as dumb as the two giants arguing about who owns a landscape it will take both of them to create. There's no doubt George was trying to be responsible and respectful – but he was also forgetting that culture is not genetic.

I agree that culture isn't genetic. Where it gets complicated for me is when we start talking about primeval forces, spirit-beings, gods, and the relationships that human beings and whole communities can have to those things. How certain spirit-beings, for example, become affiliated with certain families and lineages who fall under the protection of those beings through time, from one generation to the next, so long as the relationships are properly maintained. This is a live possibility in Anishinaabe country – I have known people, intelligent and sensible people, for whom this is true – and I came across it in Bali as well, in the figure of the barong, the village protector-spirit. I'm just not sure if an outsider can wander into Taku River country or the Balinese highlands and easily access the benefits of those relationships. There's no question here, but I'd be curious if you have any thoughts.

It can get complicated alright – and it seems to me that if you hide from the complications, they only get worse. But it's not as if population shifts and cultural integration were new and mysterious things in human experience – nor as if they were likely to cease anytime soon.

It's true that you and I can't just wander into the Balinese highlands and set up our own independent micro-society; nor can we freely enrol ourselves in a culture that's already there. We might, however, go there in peace, act respectfully, learn what we can and come home again, or learn what we can and stay. If we stayed, we might be tolerated enough for our descendants to be accepted in some degree. Or we might not. Sometimes the price of survival is assimilation; sometimes the price is persistent strangeness and cultural distance – ghettoization – and often the price is a mixture of both. Sometimes all these options appear to be closed – and sometimes what seemed to work one day will backfire the next. We've seen that happen in Turkey, Germany, Austria, Poland, Ireland, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Uganda, Rwanda, Sudan, and in a thousand other places. Perhaps, in fact, there is no place on earth except Antarctica where it *hasn't* happened. At the slightest provocation, the human sense of loyalty and relatedness shrinks to a pinhead. But oddly enough, being a cultural orphan can set you free from those knee-jerk reactions. Orphans often understand that there is no gang, clan, family, or other pinhead to retreat to; it's all or nothing.

In any case, we each have to try to stay sane. Sane people know that everybody and everything is related to everything else. They also know that places, by nature, are real. So when you find yourself in a place, however you got there, you have to learn what place it is, and learn how to respect it for what it is. If it already has human inhabitants – real inhabitants, not transitory strip-miners and clear-cutters – then they in fact are part of it, and you can't pay respect to the place without paying respect to them too.

Raiders, colonists, prospectors, and tourists are four of the great plagues. The solution, you might think, is that we all, except for maybe a few anthropologists, adventurers, and traders, ought to stay put: just stay where we're born and live whatever life that place allows. But that's never happened. There was never a time when the planet was nicely carpeted with indigenous human societies, content to be where they were. When proto-Athabaskans, proto-Algonquians, proto-Eyaks-and-Tlingits were moving into northern Canada and Alaska – the human part of a great migration of plants and animals on the heels of retreating ice – Neolithic empires were already brewing in Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and China. Which is to say, there were already colonists, prospectors, raiders, and refugees, though maybe no tourists to speak of.

Even where there were only hunter-gatherers, plenty of raiding and intermarrying and intermingling went on.

The colonization of North America is a particularly large and recent landslide of massacres, lies, and betrayals, punctuated here and there with small, localized instances of humanity and respect. But no matter how big and hideous it may be, this colonization and countless others are parts of reality. They can't be undone, nor even atoned for. In the meantime, children keep being born who know nothing whatever – nothing – except what chance allows them to learn, and who have to live as best they can with whatever ignorance and experience, love and fear, knowledge and misinformation has come their way.

Where historical wrongs are involved, it may often be easier living in ignorance than in knowledge. If easy is what you want, amnesia may be the answer. But amnesia, in this context anyway, mostly means shallow homogenization. If you want something more than that, good: there's a lot more to be had. But as somebody said, a little learning can be a big problem. Once you start, you may soon find that you have to advance or retreat: back off and try to forget, or press on and try to learn more, and more, and more. That's an eternal human predicament, so far as I can see.

Let's jump ahead fifty years now, when neither you nor I will be here, and imagine that one of your intellectual descendants has found their way to a transcript of this conversation. They're trying to figure out how to live meaningfully in a world marked by wildly unprecedented social, political, and environmental upheaval the likes of which dwarf even the worst nightmares of the twentieth century. As Yeats put it, "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned." Your intellectual descendant is terrified in the face of all this, cannot see a way forward, and turns to you. What counsel would you offer them, from our time to theirs?

A splendid question, but I'm not remotely competent to answer. After seventy-some years, I struggle to see a little way into the present, with all the help I can get from the past. Seeing into the future is something else: a gift that is given to sibyls and prophets but not to me. And from this particular present, seeing into the future is *really* something else, because the future is something we've spectacularly wrecked, just in the last few centuries, and are still at this moment deliberately, avidly wrecking. You're right to quote that poem, which describes the scene superbly and doesn't pretend to offer an answer, only hone the question and point it directly at us.

Notes

¹ Mark Dickinson is an independent scholar and author of the forthcoming book *Canadian Primal* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).

² Robert Bringhurst is a poet, translator and cultural historian. His most recent book, with Jan Zwicky, is *Learning to Die: Wisdom in the Age of Climate Crisis* (University of Regina Press, 2018).