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Vibrations in Eskimo Dog Sled Runners: Paulsen's *Dogsong*, Art and the Transcendent

By Randy Bush

In 1875 the Director of the U.S. Patent Office sent in his resignation. There was, he said, nothing left to invent.

In 1887 Marcellin Berthelot, the great chemist, wrote, "from now on there is no mystery about the universe."

from flyleaf of *Morning of the Magicians*

I rode a brown horse when I was five, a tough little brown horse whose name I've forgotten, down the steep backs of the hall stairs and across the mesa of my mother's living room. The kitchen was the Grand Canyon, and we flew past it and out the back door to land free and wild as smoke on the European steppe or in the Wyoming hills. My mount was a wooden broom handle with a tacked-on plastic head and could be contrary as the devil on Sunday. The two of us would bolt like the November wind down those wet Seattle streets. I say now, and I'll swear to it, that when I went riding, my relationship to that horse was more than one of human kid to inanimate thing. In my deepest self, in the best, the darkest, most alive parts of me, something old, something primal, came awake and sat up.

This was decades before I'd heard of Jung or of cultural anthropologist Joseph Campbell (Jung was the opposite of old and Campbell made the soup I sopped up with a grilled cheese sandwich). But if I couldn't address such lofty notions as the transcendent, or the mysterious beyond, I had unwavering faith in the monster under the bed.

But when we cast into the smoke of possibility, only by force of will, and not by understanding, do we use the language of the transcendent to describe our action? Almost as if we believed? Our speech gives us away: If I close my eyes and listen hard, I can still hear my grandfather's voice. I can taste that Dove Bar just by looking at it. I can see the old lake. And we do almost hear and taste and see because we have committed brain cells to the task of transcending the immediate. We recall; we forecast. At a simpler level, we depend on transcendental thinking to accomplish the most mundane tasks.

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1 I refer to "children's" literature knowing some of my audience may immediately think of nodding off. But those who condescendingly believe child-like and child-ish to be synonymous, would do well to recall Socrates' recipe for wisdom and Jesus' recipe for faith.
The tie between artforms and life

"I know" to be true. I can never lose my belief in monsters. I may not prove their existence to Mr. Barrow; yet neither do I have to. I know what I know without his leave.

Dutch painter Piet Mondrian knew what he knew, as well. He changed his work, slowly, from dreamy, representational landscapes into bleak geometric grids of red, yellow, and blue because he saw his art as moving past the obvious, somehow, and exposing the real bones of creation. Some would argue that all art is a thrust in that same direction. I would add that honest artists paint as transcendental exercise or to express a sort of worship of the creator of the object.

And art has served in that same way since the first human neuron blasted off its brain-to-hand message. It has provided the dynamic flux and anchor for us immortals wrapped in mortality. Art becomes a tool of myth when it is an act of expressing rather than a symbol of that act. Its absence is a computer's ideation without wire and an ant's movement without intrigue.

The tie between artforms and life in early cultures illustrates, in microcosm, a belief in a union of the mundane with the beyond. A Kitksan shaman's rattle in the form of a beaver became a thing of magic and special powers; and if we hope to speak without arrogance, which of us can say the magic was illusory? In this case, the burden of (dis)proof needs to fall squarely on the skeptics. And rather than hiding behind Descartes like stubborn first-graders who accept "nothing we don't see," for once they need to reverse their normal role and begin from the premise of believing, in the words of St. Paul, "all things". Black Elk's visions aren't "wrong" because they are unprovable. The question isn't even whether the six mystical Grandfathers exist or not. The first and most important function of the transcendental moment is to lift human beings out of the dust of the mundane. From the instant we ask ourselves to listen with ears open, to imagine, a small miracle is born in us. Besides, from the standpoint of the witness of billions of humans throughout history, the view most rooted in fantasy is one that labels all "myths" as "anidotes for mankind's psychological suspicion of smallness and insignificance..." [Barrow]. We don't pull myths over ourselves the way we pull blankets around our shoulders in winter, to protect us from the chilly truth. Myth (or open and imaginative thinking) is the language of the soul. The mind practicing avoidance behavior is the one that says, "I believe nothing but that which can be reproduced in a scientifically pure environment."

One definition of empirical evidence is directly experienced or observed evidence, and what truer observation could there be than personal experience? One of Carl Jung's patients was a woman who claimed to have traveled to the moon. No one believed her story and she was deemed to be suffering from a mental disorder. When, at last, she finally made her way to Jung, she was amazed and relieved to find that he believed her. From Jung's account, since her experience could not be proven false, it must be accepted as truth. Operating on that same principle, that of hard, cold human experience, the mystical properties of my broomstick horse are not "pretend" at all.

There are more direct examples, though, such as those of individuals who disguise themselves to become other, very different beings. The terrifying Kwakiutl Cannibal ceremony (to those of us who believe in the monster under the bed) represents just that: By donning an animal mask and performing special, sacred rites, the chosen male lifts both himself and his tribe into the transcendent or supernatural. As the mask becomes inhabited by Cannibal Spirit, the man's humanity flees or is so eclipsed as to sometimes require months to return.

The ceremony presents reality as realigned, as shaken up by the truth of the dual potentiality. As man and Cannibal Spirit blend, a unifying sense of danger, death, and rebirth is kept vital and close to the community. Hamlet was, of course, wise to assure Horatio of the existence of "more things in heaven and earth" than all the rationalists ever born could explain. And I'm not suggesting, for one moment, that every transcendental experience is good or wise. There be dragons out there. Big, mean ones. To claim to be wholly proof-driven, though, to the point of denying the unobservable, makes as little sense as that 1875 U.S. Patent Office Director who resigned his post because there was "nothing left to invent".

What is our fascination with Dracula, then, if we live, as some would say, in an intellectual, post-mythical age? By watching, horrified and delighted, as Bram Stoker's Van Helsing sends home the deadly stake, aren't we taking part in the dance around the fire of the primitive warrior who reenacts the killing of the deadly beast? At least some of us are.

Paleolithic cave paintings from deep in France's prehistory possess, if, indeed, we interpret them correctly at all, a "living" quality similar to that present in the atlatt. The Lascaux animals reveal a deep reverence for animal spirit presence by the hunters who painted them. The figures are powerful, moving, and fluid. In a wall scene from one shaft referred to by Joseph Campbell as the "holy of holies" (65),...
a hunter-shaman lies, entranced, almost beneath a tottering, eviscerated bull. Campbell is convinced of the image's religious significance, viewing it as one of many proofs that a dynamic mythic element was active in the lives of Paleolithic peoples. One might also call it a dynamic transcendent element.

We haven't changed so much; we're deep into denial, and into worship of the god of digital thermometers, and it's dark down here. But we haven't really changed. Again, each of us reveals a belief in the future, or the beyond, at least enough to get us out of bed in the morning. But so does the family dog. And if acts as unromantic and mundane as throwing off the sheets and standing up owe a tithe to imagination, then to live self-consciously is to operate with eyes wide and ready for the glory of the holy and transcendent moment. At that point we exist, joyful as the Eskimo in *Dogsong*, by interpreting the vibrations coming through our mukluks.

**Works Cited**


