

Program Information:

Title: W. Davis: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World

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Stewart Brand: Wade in a sense is taking eight lectures that he did for the Massy lectures in Canada this year last year and if you want the long version the good version of what he does tonight its all in a book called interestingly enough *The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World* and that will be outside and Wade will be outside signing those books after the talk. Field scientists lead the most exciting lives there are I think I optically find the biologists but I noticed the series its fond of anthropologists who come back with field of stories to tell about what being human really means we have had Daniel Evert who has worked in Latin America the amazing things about language; Steven Lancing working in Bali; Jerry Diamond working in Italy and partly in Guinea first on birds then on people. Wade Davis has probably been to all of those places and ingested whatever they have to offer. Not only lived to tell the tale but he has a hell of a tale to tell. Wade Davis. Wade Davis: Well thanks Stewart and thanks to so many of you for coming out tonight and I feel like I must know all of San Francisco I have so many friends here and Im especially delighted to be here with my youngest daughter whos just started college in the Bay Area, Reina who is in the front row here so its going to be a great delight to come out and be with you and with all of you in the future. Im going to try to compress what were actually five lectures delivered in this remarkable Canadian institution where by you are given the platform to deliver a lecture in each of one of five cities and they broadcast live on National radio in Canada then edited into a book. Its really a wonderful tradition Martin Luther King gave them just before he was assassinated Claude Levi Strauss, Carlos Fuentes, Margaret Atwood and its a real extraordinary kind of symbol of Canadas attempt to give ideas a place in the public sphere. I guess I will be telling you a lot of a long stories tonight a lot of stories of culture a lot of stories of the spirit of being and I often begin these talks with sort of a reflection on the delights of travel and what it really means for us and how it really for me at least as a young anthropologist and somebody asked me tonight how I became an anthropologist and it was kind of a serendipities moment. I grew up in Canada at a time when the French and the English didnt speak to each other. And I grew up in a English suburb, a communion suburb, of Montreal it was sort of a plunked like a carbuncle on the back of the flank of an old French-Canadian village that went back to the 17th Century and there literally was a road that divided the two communities and my mother used to always send me to this corner grocery store owned by a wonderful Francophone couple to buy cigarettes or to get milk of whatever she needed and I remember sitting on the edge of that road that divided these two worlds knowing full well at the age of five that across that street was a different language, a different religion, a different way of being and I was absolutely enchanted not only of the idea of the other but by this strange and subtle prohibition coming from my world about crossing that road and fortunately I had an absolutely wild older sister who shattered that boundary by falling in love with a Francophone boy and the wake of her elopement I slipped through and became enchanted with that other world and I think thats really where this long journey of culture began. And one of the intense pleasures as many of you know of travel is in deed the opportunity to live in these different worlds to realize that our world is only one of many and a chance to live amongst people who have not forgotten the old ways who still feel their past and the wind and touching stones polished by rain and taste it in the bitter leaves of plants and just to know in our hectic lives that in the Amazon jaguar shaman still journey beyond the milky way or that in the high Arctic the myths of the Inuit elders still resonate with meaning or

that the Himalayas the Buddhas still pursue the breath of the Darmah is really to remember the central lesson of anthropology and that is the idea that the world that under which we are born does not exist in some absolute sense but is just a model of reality and the other peoples arent failed attempts at being us. By definition they are unique answers to a fundamental question: what does it mean to be human and alive? And this in a sense really is the lesson of anthropology of whether its the Vodoun acolytes in Haiti, the yak herders on the slopes of Qomolangma, the eagle hunters of central Asia or the thunder hoof shaman of Mongolia.

All of these people teach us that there are other ways of being other ways of thinking other ways of orienting yourself and social and spiritual and ecological space and thats an idea of course can only fill us with hope. Now together and some years ago when I became an explorer and resident of the National Geographic with the sort of mandate to celebrate culture I coined this term ethnosphere trying to sort of forge an organizing principle to describe this extraordinary web of cultural life that enveloped the planet and it was just as important to the well being of the planet as indeed was the biological web of life that we know as the biosphere. And at that time I defined the ethnosphere as being the sum total of all thoughts and dreams ideas and myths intuitions and inspirations brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness. I saw the ethnosphere really as humanitys great legacy the symbol of all that we achieved and the promise of all that we could achieve as a wildly creative and a imaginative species. And at that time even as we became more acutely aware of the consequences of loss of biological life with a loss of habitat and the loss of planet and animal species through extinction we were somewhat unaware in a sense of a parallel process of loss. I remember when his holiness the 14th Dali Lama first spoke in the West at Harvard in the fall of 1979 and that same night across the street kitty corner to the science hall E.O. Wilson was introducing Norman Meyers who had just written a book called The Sinking Arc which is one of the first books to draw attention to the emerging biodiversity crisis and in apologizing to the sparse audience because of course, all the kids were across the street to hear his holiness, E.O. Wilson literally said that if even Harvard students cant understand the importance of these issues of biological diversity and they would rather be across the street listening to and I quote that religious kook then we know how far we have got to go. Now E.O. Wilson as decent and kind a man and as brilliant a biologist who has ever walked the earth will be the first today to regret those remarks but it shows you how far apart these worlds were but 30 years ago in the emerging days of conservation biology the biologists were insensitive to the plight of culture and the anthropologists tended to view the biologists as being misanthropic and indeed insensitive in their callous regard, in fact elitist in their callous regard for the plight of culture. Of course those things have come together and I have tried to use this term ethnosphere over the years as an organizing principle because when I first began to do this research and I connected to the linguistic community I was absolutely astonished despite all of my training in anthropology I was really not aware of the intensity of the crisis of language loss and this of course is the canary in the coal mine. No biologist would suggest that 50% of all plants and animals are moribund because it is really not true and yet that, the most apocalyptic scenario in the realm of biological diversity scarcely approaches what we know to be the most optimistic scenario in the realm of cultural diversity and the great indicator of this and of course is language loss. Nobody really knows how many languages there are. Some people say the difference between a dialect and a language is that the language has an army but we basically feel that there are roughly 6500 to 7000 languages in the world of those half arent been taught to children which means effectively they are moribund, on the brink of extinction.

Now a language isnt just a body of vocabulary or set of grammatical rules a language by definition is a flash of the human spirit its a vehicle through which the soul of each particular culture comes into a material realm. Every language, I once wrote, is an old growth forest of the mind a water shed of thought an eco system of social spiritual political possibilities and to live through a time when virtually half of the languages are being lost is to live through a time in which half of humanitys legacy is being sacrificed and of

course there are always those who say wait a minute wouldn't the world be a better place if we all spoke one tongue wouldn't communication be facilitated wouldn't it be easier to get along and my answer to that is always to say what a great idea, but let's make that universal language in [Indiscernible] let's make it [Indiscernible] let's make it [Indiscernible] let's make it Tibetan and suddenly you begin to feel as a native speaker of English what would it be like to be enveloped in silence to have no ability to pass on the wisdom of your ancestry or to anticipate the promise of your descendants but of course that is the plight of someone somewhere on earth every fortnight because on average every two weeks some elder slips away and carries with him or her into the grave the last syllables of an ancient tongue. But what really is at stake what do I mean when cultures are lost if we lose a part of ourselves? Well it may seem odd in a lecture that celebrates the wonder of culture to tip my hat to genetics but this is where the story begins. Population biologists have at last proven it to be true something that philosophers have always dreamed to be true and that is that we are all quite literally brothers and sisters and I don't mean that in the spirit of hippy ethnography I mean quite literally we are all cut from the same genetic cloth. Studies of the human genome and studies of the Y chromosome descendant through the male lineage and mitochondrial DNA through the female lineage have left absolutely no doubt that the human genetic endowment is a single continuum. It is suggested that race is an absolute utter fiction. In fact we cannot only identify the place where the garden of Eden was we can also identify the place in Africa where our ancestors walked out of that continent and indeed all of humanity is descended from a relatively small number of individuals who roughly 55,000 years ago slipped away from the ancient continent and in an epic hejira of 2500 generations carried our species to every habitable corner of the planet. But if you accept that we are all cut from the same genetic cloth there is an obvious corollary. If we are all cut from the same genetic cloth we all share by definition the same intellectual potential the same raw mental acuity the same capacity for thought, for belief for dreams and therefore how we choose to use that universal capacity is simply a matter of choice we have a conceit in the West that while we have been developing technological wizardry somehow the other peoples of the world have been intellectually idle nothing can be further from the truth. We may put a priority on technological innovation but other people such as the aboriginal societies of Australia pay attention more intensely to unraveling the complex threads of memory inherit in a myth.

But this revelation finally puts the lie to the old 19 century corollary that there is a progress in human affairs that goes from the savage to the barbarian to the civilized of the strand in London. It shows without any doubt that culture is only a manifestation of options that there is no ladder to success that conveniently places ourselves to the top there is no pyramid of success that places industrialized Victorian society at the apex of the pyramid that slopes down to the so called primitives of the world there really only are a series of options. And so the other peoples of the world are not failed attempts being us, they are unique answers to this fundamental question what does it mean to be human and alive. And when people are asked that question they respond with 7,000 different voices and those voices collectively become are human repertoire for dealing with the challenges that will confront us in the ensuing millennia. I think ultimately that's a great lesson of anthropology and you know I was very fortunate I'm sure many of you know the writings of Matthieu Ricard who was the translator for his holiness in France has written a number of wonderful books including a book on happiness that made the number one best seller list. It was number one book in France. I didn't even know that the French actually believed in the concept of happiness. He didn't either but he somehow pulled it off. But I travelled with Matthieu in Nepal to make a film that we call the Science of the Mind why did we use that term science to describe Tibetan Buddhism. What is science but the empirical pursuit of the truth what is Buddhism but 2500 years of direct observation as to the nature of mind. Matthieu who himself was originally a molecular biologist studying in the lab of Nobel laureate at the Pasteur Institute outside of Paris said to me one day that so much of western science is a major response

to minor needs. We spend all of our lifetimes trying to live to be 100 without losing our teeth. We in Tibet he said spend all of our lifetime trying to understand the nature of existence. He said that your billboards in the West celebrate naked teenagers in underwear our billboards are manuals of prayers for the well being of all sentient creatures. But what do I mean by different ways of thinking making for quite different possibilities of both the human spirit but of the human adaptation. Well lets slip for a moment into the greatest culture sphere ever brought into being by human beings that of Polynesia. Tens of thousands of islands flung like jewels upon the southern sea a Diaspora that we now know began 10 centuries before Christ off the coast of New Guinea and ancient civilization that we call Lapita within 10 centuries they had moved East as far as Fiji and beyond to Tonga and Samoa therefore reasons that we do not understand it stopped for a 1000 years the ceramic tradition was lost but not notions of the decoration of the human body, the nature of the ancestors, the divine origins of the wind. And then sometime around 200 years before the Christian era what we now know to be the modern Polynesians began this extraordinary journey sailing East from Samoa and Tonga ultimately to Cook Islands Tahiti 4000 Kilometers to the Marquesas eventually North to Hawaii and then South East to Rapa Nui or Easter Island and eventually around the time of the first crusade reaching back to what we now call New Zealand and I recently was able to sail with the Polynesian Voyaging Society on a vessel named the Hokule'a after Arcturus the sacred star of Hawaii. This is a recreated catamaran based on the drawings made by Captain Cooks artist and naturalist Joseph Banks and the Hokulea has sailed throughout the South Pacific recreating the journeys of the ancestors. And these are sailors who even today can name 250 stars in a night sky these are sailors who can sense the presence of distant atolls of islands beyond the visible horizon simply by watching and studying the reverberation of waves across the hull of the vessel knowing full well that every island group in the pacific has its own unique refractive pattern that can be read with the same perspicacity with which a forensic scientist would read a finger print. These are sailors who in the darkness in the hull of the vessel can distinguish as many as five different sea swells moving through the canoe at any one point in time distinguishing currents that are caused by lower wave patterns that are caused by local weather system from the deep currents of pulsate thousands of kilometers across the pacific and can be followed with the same ease with which a terrestrial explorer would follow a river to the sea and the most amazing thing about this tradition is that the Polynesians did not have the written word and the entire system of navigation was based on dead reckoning, dead reckoning simply means that you only know where you are but remembering where you have come from. And it was the impossibility of a long voyage by means of dead reckoning that kept European transports hugging the shore lines of continents until the British solved the problem of longitude with the invention of the chronometer. But centuries before that the wayfinders of the Polynesian civilization swept across the greatest ocean on earth. Now dead reckoning means that you have to literally remember every change of course every change of wind every impression from the natural world over the course of a long voyage the Hokulea once sailed from Hawaii to Rapa Nui now thats sailing 6000 miles crossing the doldrums tacking into the wind for 1500 miles which effectively quadruples the length of the journey all to reach an island that was 25 kilometers across less than a degree on a compass were compass in fact would be on board but of course there was no compass. And that journey was completed within our life times simply by the navigators of the Polynesian Voyaging Society reaching back to the whispered threads of memory into the tradition of the navigators and bringing back this way of travel to life and so indeed if you took all the genius that allowed us to put a man on the moon and applied it to an understanding of the ocean what you will get is Polynesia. Now if we moved from the ocean to the forest and we enter the greatest forest on earth we come into the heart of the Amazon and the Amazon invokes cliché even as it defies hyperbole after all its the greatest expanse of forest on earth larger than the continental United States or more poetically put larger than the face of the full moon. And virtually everything we understood about the Amazon when I went to graduate school has been turned on its head. Its really fascinating

you know Joseph Conrad described the rain forest as the jungle he said is less a forest than a primeval mob a remnant of an ancient era when vegetation rioted and consumed the world and this was the image of the rainforest as green hell a kind of an evil place. By the time I came along the jungle had become a term that had gone long out of fashion and the rainforest itself had become an Eden a kind of a delicate Eden often called the counterfeit paradise that could clearly endure our ways so long. Well this idea of the rainforest is a delicate place was informed in part by basic understanding of the nature of tropical rainforest ecosystems and the fact that the biological wealth is not within the soil but within the living vegetation itself and so the idea is you have all heard is that if you remove that canopy you set a motion a chain reaction of destruction of cataclysmic significance well this concept while useful as a fundamental way of thinking about this eco systems when applied to a rain forest the size of the continental United States was as much slogan as science. And 50 years of field research has given us a very different notion of what the Amazon in fact is. Now this of course is a place of remarkable cultures people like the Barasana or people of the Anaconda who believe that mythologically they came up the milk river from the East in the belly of the sacred serpent only to be regurgitated under the various earth affluence of the Northwest Amazon a people who are so entwined with that force in their adaptations that cognitively they do not distinguish the color green from the color blue because the canopy of the heavens is equated to the canopy of the rain forest. Im going to tell you a little bit of a complicated but revelatory story. I first went to live with the Barasana in 1974 and I felt first of all they are about as far away as you can get anyway in the Northwest Amazon. The Northwest Amazon of Colombia is the size of France. And at the time I felt this was a disappearing world and that was an old canard of anthropologists at the time and there was something going on here that was extraordinarily unique and special but anthropologists hadnt quiet figured out what it was. Our views of the Amazon were much more commonly influenced by what we had experienced with other cultures people like the Waorani who were a remarkable society living in the Eastern flanks of the Andes in Ecuador are people first peacefully contacted in 1958 fully five years after I was born. The Waorani were a remarkable people in part because in there isolation they had created a kind of an intense intra-tribal warfare such as 54% of the mortality was due to them spearing each other. But they did have a remarkable knowledge of the forest their hunters could smell animal urine at 40 paces and tell you what form of life had left that behind. These kinds of gifts enchanted anthropologists and ethno-botanists as we pursued plants like this one the flying death, the curare dart venoms that of course yield a d-tubocurarine the muscle relaxant that revolutionized medicine in the 1940s and we became enchanted by the allure of the Shaman. Isolated individuals who took these extraordinary metaphysical journeys into the realm of the divine in order to work their deeds of medical and mystical rescue individuals who would use these curious plants like epena the semen of the sun the blood-red resin of several species in the genus Virola containing powerful psychotropic agents dimethyltryptamine 5-methoxy-dimethyltryptamine as the late Terrence McKenna so famously said to have this stuff blown up your nose was like to be shot out of a rifle barrel lined with Baroque paintings and landing in a sea of electricity. It created not the distortion of reality it created the disillusion of reality. In fact I used to argue with my professor at Harvard the legendary plant explorer Richard Evan Schultes the man who sparked the psychedelic era with his discovery of the magic mushrooms in Mexico in 1938 that you really couldnt classify this tryptamines as hallucinogenic because by the time you are under the influence there is no one home anymore to experience the hallucinations. But we became enchanted with this not simply because of the dazzling pharmacological effects of this plants but what they told us about the different way of knowing and the example are that the plants have become very popular in the West ayahuasca the vision vine the vine of the soul which critically is not a plant but a preparation. Now those tryptamines are taken through the nose because they are orally inactive because the are denatured by an enzyme found naturally in the human stomach monoamine oxidase. They can only be taken orally if taken in conjunction with some

other drug that denatures the MAO in the human gut. So ayahuasca is actually a combination of the leaves in this case of nondescript shrub in the coffee family chalk-full of tryptamines and the bark of a non-descript woody leona filled with these curious ?-carbolines, harmine, and harmaline which turned out to be MAO inhibitors of the precise sort necessary to potentiate the tryptamines and the reason is so intriguing anthropologists and ethno-botanists is because you ask the fundamental question how in a flora of 80,000 species of vascular plants did the indigenous people learn to combine these two morphologically distinct denizens of the rain forest in this powerful synergistic way a kind of bio-chemical version of the whole being graded in some of the parts and the only answer we had scientifically was trial and error which was quickly exposed as being a meaningless euphemism. The Indians would say the plants teach us Schultes famously in the 1940s identified 17 varieties of the ayahuasca leona all of which were referable to his Harvard trained taxonomic eyes the same species and yet the people recognized them consistently in the forest and when he asked them the nature of their systematic they looked at him as if he were a fool or a naive and they explained that of course anyone who studies plants would know that if you took each one of the 17 on the night of a full moon and each one sang to you in a different key. Well that's not going to get you a Ph.D at Berkeley in plant systematics but it's a lot more interesting than counting flower parts but it tells you something about a different way of being. Now this is really what I want to try and get around to these what we call marginal societies was a lens through which if I mentioned that we had this idea of the Amazon being this delicate fragile place that persisted in the literature and part because it served a legitimate environmental agenda and our concerns were the deforestation with the expansion of the Brazilian frontier in particular from the South but it also fit Western preconceptions of what it meant to live in the Amazon. By the time Europeans had modern contact with the Amazon of course the main trunk had been deep populated by disease at the time of contact and the only extant societies were the societies that we came to know as the marginal societies not in a pejorative term but these were simply the societies that literally lived at the margins of the Amazon basin unreachable because of cataracts from below unreachable from the West because the Andes were introverted by roads until after World War II and so when anthropologists flooded into the Amazon in the 1960s these were the real Indians that we were drawn to see. Now typically these societies were endogenous and married amongst themselves often in open conflict with their neighbors. They were relatively simple in their technology, simple in their social structures, and these were became the image we had of the Amazon Indian but if we look back at the journals of de Orellana, Gaspar de Carvajal who wrote in 1541 the first Europeans to go down the Amazon it's said that when they reached the confluence of the Napo and the Ucayali as the rivers were known in Peru Orellana went temporarily insane because he couldn't understand how a river on God's earth could be so big and so that idea together with the fact that they encountered the Amazon women and the Amazon women immediately caused the chronicle that Gaspar de Carvajal wrote to be denigrated and ridiculed not because of what he said about the Amazon but because he repeated this canard about Amazon women that every explorer come home with because they had learned in the journals of Horaditas. And so Cortez found the black queen Calafia which is why you call yourself Californians you know Columbus found warrior queens in the Antilles and so the journals of Orellana's expeditions were kind of dismissed from history and they weren't even published until 1985 but if you look at those journals the minute they reach the Napo they encountered civilizations. The entire river banks of the Amazon were populated by 1000s of people we now know the Amazon was not an empty place but the homeland of tens of millions of people. We now believe that slash and burn agriculture is not this delicate way to live in the forest, but probably is the technology that developed in the wake of contact with the arrival of steel tools we now know that 20% of the Amazon is made up of black soils human created soils the people didn't slash and burn and move on they had every incentive to stay put and they did. So there were these great civilizations in the Amazon that archeology is only beginning to unveil. Just last week you probably saw the reports of the discoveries in Bolivia a

clearly huge concentration of populations the question is what came of those visions? And is there a place in the Northwest Amazon where such visions are still alive? And there is in the homeland of the people of the Anaconda, isolated people who have lived very differently from those marginal societies these are people like the Barasana the Tukano the Makuna the Taiwanos living in this incredibly complex societies in this isolated black water rivers incredibly complex ritual activities. Knowledge based traditions in which the savon is honored beyond the warrior living in great monumental structures that in there symbolic elaborations are as significant as anything the Inca ever built. Ritual institutions that facilitate peace not war not the least of which is a curious marriage rule that in order to marry you must marry someone who speaks a different language and so in anyone longhouse you will have 6 and 7 languages spoken but curiously you will never hear a child practicing a distinct tongue they simply wait watch listen and begin to speak. And we went back to make a film with the people of the Anaconda last year and where all of this come together is the ritual where you dont have isolated individuals and [Indiscernible] in the forest you have 215 men in full ritual regalia five days and nights imbibing copious amounts of ayahuasca literally becoming the ancestors to journey through sacred space back to the points of origin that dont exist in historical time but exist today in which mythology it self becomes an incredibly sophisticated land management plan which literally allowed populations numbering in the tens of thousands and indeed millions to live in the Amazon. We realize now that to have tried to understand the Amazon as we did would be like trying to understand British civilization from the perspective of the Hebraids after London had been nucleated by an atomic bomb. We are now discovering that the Amazon is a place of huge civilizations and indeed the incredible thing is that the people the Anaconda are still there to inform us precisely how those civilizations found a way to live in that forest. And that was to me the most remarkable expedition I have in the last 20 years. But this idea of turning to landscape as a key character and a key to understanding culture I think its something that came to me very early in my career. I was very fortunate to be part of the remarkable study of a plant known to the Inca as a divine leaf of immortality coca the notorious source of cocaine and we knew at that time of that assignment which I must say the dream academic grant of the 1970s a quarter million dollars from the US government a brand new Dodge pick up truck a wonderful dog named Pogo and every conceivable drug known to man. I think Tim Plowman and I ate our way through South America but coca became this remarkable lens for understanding Indian life you know the in the time of the Inca a shrine could not be approached if you did not have coca in your mouth unable to cultivate coca the elevation of the imperial capital of Cusco the Inca replicated it into golden and silver leaf in fields that covered the landscape and to this day there is no gesture that occurs in the Andes that is not mediated by some kind of reciprocal exchange of the energy of that sacred leaf with the landscape itself no field can be plant or harvested no child led into the realm of life or elder taken into the realm of death without some kind of ritual gesture involving the sacred plant. And the lens of coca then opened up this remarkable sense of relationships which I define in the book *The Wayfinders* as a notion of sacred geography and again Im not speaking in terms of hippy ethnography what Im saying is what does it really mean to believe as the people of the Andes do that the earth is alive depending on the human imagination responsive to the needs of human beings even as human beings are in turn responsible for certain ritual obligations towards the earth itself. The point isnt whether a mountain is in fact a mountain deity or sacred being or whether its a pile of rock the interesting observation is how the perspective changes the relationship between the human society and that part in natural resource. I mean I was raised in the forest of British Colombia to believe that those forest existed to be cut and that was the foundation of the ideology of scientific forestry that I learned in school and I practiced as a logger in the woods that made me a profoundly different human being than my friends amongst the first nations who believe that those same forests [Indiscernible] heaven and the cannibal spirits who dwelled at the North end of the world spirits that would have to be embraced during the [Indiscernible]

initiation such as the wisdoms of the wild to be brought back to the community during the [Indiscernible]. Now again the issue isn't whether that forest was mere cellulose and [Indiscernible] or whether it was a domain of the spirits the interesting observation is how those beliefs result in different outcomes you know the first nations of the British Columbia have lived on that coast for 1000s of years having had a relatively modest ecological footprint whereas the world view from which I emerged has ravaged that coast in less than 3 generations and so I have always been interested in these ritual gestures that create the sense of relationship and of course in the Andes it's not a metaphysical thing but it's something people live everyday. People see that the clouds condense into the rain on the flanks of the mountains they see that the rains bring fertility to the field they live in a place where a hailstorm or a deep frost can wipe out a crop in 15 minutes as occurred in Cusco in 1983. So this idea of having to perpetuate the natural world comes in a sense naturally and it happens both in the community level and kind of a pan-Andean level. Now I spend a lot of time around a small town called Chinchero outside of Cusco outside the summer palace of the second of the great Inca rulers. And once each year this remarkable event occurs where by the fastest young boy from every hamlet is given the honor for the day of becoming a woman and dressed up in the trache of his sister or his mother he becomes a transvestite known as waylaka, and as waylaka he must carry the ritual banners of the community on a run but it's not your ordinary run. It starts off at 11,500 feet runs down 2000 feet to the base of the sacred mountain the Apu Antakillqa and then sores up to 15,000 feet only to fall away the other side to the sacred valley only to climb once more over two soaring Andean passes over the course of a very long day. The entire perimeter of the race is the boundary of the community a boundary that is marked by mujones or [Indiscernible] the sacred piles of dirt where the Waylakama spin to bring the vortex of the feminine to the mountain top where coca is given to the earth were libations of alcohol are blown to the wind and the metaphor is so beautiful is that people go into the mountains as individuals but through sacrifice which means to make sacred and through exhaustion they emerge as a community that through ritual gesture has once again reaffirmed its sense of belonging and more importantly its sense of obligation to that particular spirit of place. And I can assure you that when I completed the mujon omientos at the age of 48, I was the first outsider Steve King ran part of it, my old friend here. I think I was the first person to complete it and Steve would have completed it with me if he had been in the field, I'm sure, but I also can promise you that I only managed to complete it by chewing more coca leaves in one day than anyone in the 2000 year history of the planet. But these localized pilgrimages become pan-Andean in these fantastic rituals like the Qoyllur Rit'i which occurs close to Corpus Christie when the Pleiades reemerged in the sky and its kind of an like of an Andean Woodstock. It has deep pre-Columbian roots, tens of thousands of Indian people from all over the Southern Andes emerge on this sacred valley of the Sinakara which is dominated by the 3 tongues of the great glacier and in this perfect fusion of pre-Columbian and catholic beliefs which is the reality of the pan-Andean world of the last 500 years. The ritual symbolism is profound. People move up into the high mountains carrying a black stone to be placed at the foot of the glaciers. They move up following the stages of the cross in pure Christian liturgical procession. But they do so in the shadow of Ausangate, the most sacred of all the summits of the Andean empire, and then they carry their crosses from their communities into the ice to plant them into the ice over night that they may become empowered by the resonance of [Indiscernible]. The people who carry the crosses up the [Indiscernible] are those uniquely empowered to deal with the [Indiscernible] the spirits of the dead that dwell on the place of, of ambiguity which is ice. Now these sorts of contemporary rituals even allow us to deconstruct such common, such iconic places of Machu Picchu. How many of you have been to Machu Picchu? Lots of you. I'm sure many of you heard it described as a lost city. It was only a lost city in the fantasies of the National Geographic. Its perfectly situated geographically to control access to [Indiscernible] the one quadrant of [Indiscernible] the one part of the Incan empire the Inca never could totally dominate the eastern lowlands, a vital source of coca,

medicinal inspiration, medicinal plants. It also controlled the access geographically to the sacred valley leading up to Cusco. You simply have to look around and you can see the network of roads that linked it in to the 14000 kilometers of roads that the Inca built in the less than 100 years of the Empire's existence. But more significantly Machu Picchu is linked in to Andean notions of cosmology and sacred geography. If you go to the center point as you all did, the Intiwatana, called the hitching post of the sun, this strange abstract monolith carved out of stone at the center. You suddenly notice that the Apu, the sacred mountain of Machu Picchu which is a sugarloaf mountain many of you climbed, Huayna Picchu, the light that falls in the face of Intiwatana constantly reflects a little that is at the face of the Apu. If you come to the south for Intiwatana you discover an altar. Go to the top of the summit of Huayna Picchu, you find a parallel altar. Do a direct north-south bearing and you find to your astonishment that the bearing bisects the Intiwatana, continues to the horizon where it bisects Salcantay the second of the most sacred mountain of the Inca the mountain that metaphysically is seen as the source of all the water for the site of Machu Picchu. But then it gets even more complex because the Milky Way which is the most important astronomical configuration for the Inca and the Southern Cross is at the Southern most point in the sky it too is in that same direct bearing. And if you climb Machu Picchu mountain you find that the Vilcanota or the Urubamba which like a serpent envelopes Machu Picchu and the Vilcanota or the Urubamba was of course seen as the earthly equivalent of the Milky Way it was also the trajectory along which Viracocha walked to the dawn of time when he brought the empire into existence but where is the Urubamba born? In the snow fields of Ausangate. So 500 years after the conquest, when people go back to the glaciers of the Koiariti(Sp) they are echoing notions of sacred geography that we know go back for 1500, 2000 years in the Andes. And if what you experience in the southern part of Peru is a perfect reflection of the syncretic reality that came with the conquest by the Spanish, there is one place in South America where the pre-Columbian voices remain unfettered and that's in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta of Columbia. This incredible isolated volcanic massive that soars to 6000 meters right out of the coastal plain of Columbia, the largest coastal mountain range on earth a mountain that's the homeland of the elder brothers. The four tribes, the Kankuamo, the Wiwa, the Kogi and the Arhuacos who were descendants of the Tairona civilization which was the civilization that carpeted the Caribbean coastal plain and the civilization that was vanquished by the Spanish in 1571. In the wake of that their descendants slipped up into the, this mountain and transformed their civilization from that of a warrior based militaristic society into truly a devotional society of peace. They call themselves the elder brothers, the central metaphor of their culture is the loom. They say upon this loom I weave my life. As they move up and down the slopes of the Sierra Nevada, exploiting various ecological niches they refer to their movements as threads so that over the course of the lifetime you literally weave a cloth over the body of the earth itself, Sarankua (Sp). And indeed when they plant a garden the women plant the southern half like this the men plant the northern half like this so that if you turn the garden on top of itself you literally get a piece of cloth. They believe that their prayers and their prayers alone maintain that cosmic balance. And the training for the priest hood may still remain to this day in a blood-stained continent ruled by a ritual priesthood is intense in the extreme. The young acolytes are taken away from their families at the age of 3 and 4 with the support of the parents and the sequestered for 18 years. Two nine year periods deliberately chosen to mimic the nine months of gestation in their natural mothers womb, now they are metaphorically in the womb of the great mother. And for that entire time, the world only exists as an obstruction as they are taught the values of their society which maintain that their prayers and ritual gestures literally maintain the cosmic balance. And after this incredibly intense initiation which Reichel-Dolmatoff the legendary Columbian anthropologist reported in the 1940s literally occurred in the darkness of the mens temple. They were led out before light and taken on pilgrimage and for the first time their lives, they literally see the world in all of its beauty and they are told you see as I have told you

its yours to protect. Reichel never accompanied one of those pilgrimages and it was something I always wanted to do. I wanted to find out if it could possibly be as exotic and intense as he had described. And my opportunity came just about 2 years ago when this man came into my office at the National Geographic a leader of a delegation of Mamos who were there in Washington at the invitation of the Columbian embassy and as Danilo Viathanya began to speak to me, I interrupted him, I said hey, I hate to be bothersome but you look an awful lot like an old friend of mine, and the man on the right here turned out to be Danilos father who I lived with, with Tim Plowman in 1974 and I said, Danilo, I hate to be rude but you may not think you know me but when you were a baby I carried you on my back up and down the mountain. and then I showed him a photograph of his father from a book of mine, One River, we had a great laugh and out of that kind of [Indiscernible] came this really remarkable invitation to accompany Yuhenio, the boy on the left, is now this man here, second from the left and Aloberto was murdered by the paramilitary. So there was this very big emotional kind of reconnection that led to this remarkable journey where we began at the sea and accompanied one of these initiates on the journey to the ice. And the metaphor is you take products from the se to the sacred ice and products from the ice back to the sea. And we discovered that the apprenticeship is indeed as intense as Reichel described. Its not always in the darkness of the hut, but the young apprentice to be never leaves the confines of the mens ceremonial center until the moment of the journey. And the journey takes you literally above the trees to what the people call the heart of the world. Every single ripple in the landscape resonates with mythological significance. Even the hats that the Arhuacos wear are an echo of the sacred snow found at the heart of the world. And this was an extraordinary journey because off course those mountains have been a center of insurgency in the FARC were there and we had the misfortune of being stalked by a FARC patrol and so in the end we had to actually abandon our quest just before the sacred lakes and slip away led by two of the Arhuacos but we were fortunate in having trained, Wiwa cameramen, so we simply gave the camera to our colleagues and they finished the film for us as we had a kind of wild west escape that took us back down to the sea. But the extraordinary thing is to think that two hours from Miami Beach in a homeland that is still on the Coast, you know, cluttered with brothels and discotheques and high rises you still have the elder brothers praying everyday for our collective well being. They call themselves the elder brothers and they dismiss the rest of us who have in their minds ruined the world as the younger brothers. And they speak in full and specific paragraphs about the obligation of human beings to be stewards of the planet. Now, I was very very fortunate I think to study not only with someone like Tim Plowman but also with the great Richard Evan Schultes. And after several years of working in South America as an ethno-botanist, I kind of lived by Marcia McLuhan adage that if it works, its obsolete and there got to a point where I just thought Id done most of what I wanted to do in the botanical realm and I was looking for another kind of challenge and I was at the right institution because there was always some possibility of lurking in the fourth floor area of Richard Evan Schultes and one winter day in the, in February of 1982 he summoned me to his office and asked me very casually whether I was interested in going down to Haiti infiltrating the secret societies and securing the formula of the drug used to make zombies. Well naturally I said yes. And I went off to this remarkable Haitian-African reality thinking that it might be a lark having no idea that it would end up consuming 4 years of my life because what I experienced in Haiti within 24 hours was something that had eluded me in the Amazon for all those years. And that was truly a window wide open to the mystic and I added this images tonight because Haiti should be in all off our thoughts tonight literally, it may be the case of hundreds of thousands of people have died in this terrible earthquake. The epicenter of which was 10 kilometers from the Voudon temple where I did my research. But I went down there as naive as anyone about this remarkable religion and its interesting, if I asked you to name the great religions of the world what would you say. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, whatever theres always one continent left out, sub Saharan Africa. The assumption being that black people had no religion and off course they

did and Voodoo is not a black magic cult, its simply the distillation of very profound religious ideas that came over during the tragic eras of slavery and became sown in the foreign soils of the new world. The essence of Voodoo is a dynamic relationship between the living and the dead whereby the living give birth to the dead, the dead become seen as the multiple expressions of the divine but in this quintessentially democratic faith, even the dead must be made to serve the living. To serve the living they must become manifest, to become manifest they must be recalled to the world to momentarily displace the souls of the living so that for that brief shining moment human being and God become one and the same. Thats why the Asian people always said to me, you white people go to church and speak about God, we dance in the temple and become god. And spirit possession is not kind of psychic unrest, its a moment of divine grace when the human being literally is taken by the spirit and as a spirit you cannot be harmed and so you see these powerful gestures and individual hear and benign and slicing into a skin with a razor to show the power of his faith or more profoundly in Haiti Voodoo Acolytes handling burning embers with impunity. And this ability to cast a body into trance was one that absolutely enchanted me and I think more than anything gave me a sense of the power of belief, the power of culture to create new realities. So this is literally a photograph taken if you went 10 kilometers from that [Indiscernible] you would hit the epicenter of where this earthquake happened yesterday. So, you know, in the end we sort of have to ask as to what kind of world we want to live in. We have this sort of sense that you know, these cultures quaint and colorful though they may be or somehow destined to fade away as if by natural laws, if their failed attempts at being us, failed attempts at being modern, nothing could be further from the truth. Change is no threat to culture. All cultures are always dancing with new possibilities for life. Technology is no threat to culture. Technology is a gift to culture. These arent cultures destined to fade away and every case is a dynamic living peoples being driven out of existence by identifiable forces. And thats actually an optimistic observation because it suggests that if human beings are the agents of cultural destruction we can be the facilitators of cultural survival. Now when I did the research on zombies I wrote a book that was made into the worst Hollywood movie in history, called The Serpent and the Rainbow, and Hemmingway said that if you sell a book to Hollywood you should start of in Arizona drive to the California line, throw the book over and go back to Tucson and have a drink. I didnt do that, I with my good friend Ian McKenzie, a linguist here in the audience went off to the rainforest of Borneo because we had heard about the plight of the Penan and I think we were both enchanted with the idea of a Nomadic people living in the rain forest. Because ofcourse Nomadic life is what we all as humans once shared until the Neolithic revolution of 12,000 years ago. And nomadic cultures are profoundly different. How do you measure wealth for example in a society in which there is no incentive to accumulate material possessions? Well wealth becomes seen as a stretch of social relations between people because if those relations fray everybody suffers. By the same token, a certain form of generosity becomes reflexive because you never know when you will be the next to bring food to the table. Or who will be the next to bring food to the table. I once gave a cigarette to a Penan woman and watched as she tore it apart to distribute the individual strands of tobacco equitably rendering the product useless but honoring the obligation to share. And the Penan had a quality of being that it struck every outside observer who had been fortunate enough to live amongst them and off course that way of life in a generation was swept away. At a time when you heard so much about the deforestation of the Amazon in the mid 80s Brazil perhaps produced 3 percent of the tropical log exports as much as 45 percent was coming from Malaysia. Much of it from the homeland of the Penan. And so in single generation a way of life morally inspired, inherently right was literally clasped along with the rain forest that in a sense had given it birth. And Ill never forget the day when Ian called me from I think he was in Singapore and I was in Lhasa to let me know that the last of the nomadic Penan had in fact settled. And in nomadic societies are not, you know, its almost, theres a whole other thing that goes on which is in a non written tradition it seems there is a relationship to the

natural world that I've experienced with non-literate societies. It's almost as if in the same way that we can hear the voices of a character when we read a novel, my experience with Athabaskan peoples in northern Canada or the Penan, it's almost like the flight of a bird becomes a cursive script of nature like a vocabulary written on the wind. And the thought that a way of life could have slipped away within a lifetime is almost too haunting to imagine but these sorts of industrial intrusions do not just occur in distant realms of the world, this my closest friend in Canada Oscar Denis who is leading the fight for a place that we call the Sacred Headwaters. By an extraordinary accident of geography three of our most important salmon rivers the Skeena, Stikine and the Nass are all born in the same meadows at a place known to the indigenous people as the Sacred Headwaters. That's the place that there are now proposals for the extraction of coal copper and gold mines and most threatening of all a proposal by Royal Dutch Shell to impose colbert methane extraction a template of wells that will literally blanket the entire head waters. And what I find curious about these developments environmental concerns aside is what they tell us about the way we approach the natural world. We take it as a, to be quite normal that a handful of men back in Toronto can cobble together a company with less history than my dog get online, and secure the sub service rights to a place that they have never been, of which they have no experience the narratives of which they have no connection to and secure simply promising the government a certain revenue flow either in terms of taxation or royalties they secure the right to by definition in their own self interest leave that landscape transformed and indeed violated forever. We take that as a given but it's highly anomalous in human affairs. The only place in the world I know where such a miracle of geography happens is on the slopes of Mount Kailash in Tibet where the Indus, the Brahmaputra and the Ganges are born. Yeah, you can't even set foot on that mountain let alone impose industrial infrastructure and the thought of doing so would condemn your lineage for all time. We take this as an absolute normal way of industrializing the wild. There's not a single metric in the calculus that rationalizes industrialization of the wild that takes into account the value of the land left alone or the cost inherent in its destruction for the commons which is the rest of us. We think of that as normal but it's highly anomalous in human affairs. And it's certainly not the way that the Tahltan people think. And it's not the way that the Aboriginal people of Australia think. I recently made a film for the National Geographic for the dram time because I wanted to go to what had historically been seen as the civilization or the culture that more than any was seen to be different than that of the west. and indeed when the British first washed ashore on the shores of Australia they found a strange landscape, strange animals and a strange people who looked strange who clearly had a simple primitive technology and what most offended the British is that the Aboriginal people of Australia clearly had never attempted to improve upon their lot. That was offensive to the British because self-improvement was the ethos of the Victorian age. The British concluded off course that the Aboriginal people of Australia were savages. And they simply began to shoot them. As recently as 1902 it was debated in the Parliament in Australia as to whether Aboriginal people were human beings. As recently as the 1960s a text book for kids in Australia a treasury of fauna of Australia, included the Aborigines as among the interesting examples of Australian wild-life. But what was it that was really going on? What the British failed to understand was that the Aboriginal people had in fact developed one of the most extraordinary philosophical traditions in the history of humanity. We know from the studies of Y chromosome that the Aboriginal people of Australia were the first wave of human beings to walk out of Africa. They reached Australia remarkably quickly and certainly had settled the continent by 50,000 years ago. They reached that most parsimonious of continents and then they went walking over time establishing as many as 10,000 clan territories all of which were linked together by a single idea. And that idea was the dreaming. And the dreaming wasn't a dream it was a state of perpetual existence in multi-dimensional space. The purpose of life for the Australian was not to improve on anything but simply to do the ritual gestures that were necessary to maintain the world exactly as it was at the time of the first dawning when

the rainbow serpent spread its body across the earth and the ancestors sang the world into being. In not one of the 670 dialects and languages of Australia is there a word for time, past, present, or future. The Aboriginal people of Australia were not victims of history, they were people who in a sense had defeated the notion of history itself. A people whose traditions answered both the question how and why. And the fascinating thing is not to say who was right and who was wrong or to idealize in any particular ways the adaptation of these people but to simply ask the obvious question, had human beings followed this particular devotional philosophy yes we would not have put a man on the moon but we also wouldn't be talking about the capacity of the human beings through climate change to transform the biological life supports of the planet. Now very often the threat to culture is ideological. This is a photograph I took of a Buddhist Nun at Angkor Wat who has had her hands and feet cut from her body for the crime of practicing her religious faith. And if we slip for a moment into the mountains of Tibet we see the consequences of that fateful moment when Mao Zedong the Marxist communist ideologue who had the remarkable achievement of being responsible for the death of more of his own people in his lifetime than Hitler and Stalin combined. Well Mao Zedong famously whispered in the ears of his holiness the Dalai Lama that all religion was poison, his holiness knew what was coming. And of course with the invasion of Tibet in the final transformation of Tibet in 1959, 1.2 million Tibetans may have died and 6000 temples reduced to ruff raff and dust. And you have to ask as I asked Matthieu Ricard what was it that so threatened the Marxist materialist in this curious and remarkable faith of Buddhism? What is the Buddhist Dharma? It comes down to the four noble truths. All life is suffering. By that the Buddha didn't mean that all life is negation, he just meant that shit happens. The cause of suffering is ignorance and by that the Buddha did not mean stupidity. He meant the tendency of human beings in their cruel delusions to cling to the illusion of their own centrality in the stream of desire. The 3rd of the noble truths was the revelation that ignorance could be overcome and the 4th and the most practical was the literal delineation of a contemplative practice that had followed not only had a possibility of the transformation of the human heart but had 2500 years of empirical evidence that such a transformation could happen. And with Matthieu and a Tibetan doctor, I undertook a couple of years ago this kind of pilgrimage of the heart to the flanks of Everest under the graces of [Indiscernible] [1:08:41] the head of the Nigma tradition. Not to climb the mountain but to go to a place where we could encounter a true Bodhisattva, a true hero. A wisdom hero. A woman who had given up the possibility of her own liberation from the realm of Samsara and stayed in the realm of Samsara to facilitate the liberation of other sentient beings. We went up past the caves where [Indiscernible] had spent a year of his 7 years of his medical training in solitary isolation and we came eventually through the graces of Matthieu [Indiscernible] to this site. A woman who 45 years before had gone into isolated retreat and for all of that time she had lived in a cell at a nunnery chanting a single mantra and the minute this door opened the first time light had fallen on her face from the sun in 45 years, I half expected to meet a mad woman. Instead I met a woman a woman whose eyes sparkled with happiness and contentment and this is the point for the Buddhist, the proof of the efficacy of the science of the mind is the serenity achieved by the practitioner of the four noble truths. So in the end my point is we have a choice. What kind of world do we want to live in? Margaret Mead said before she died that her greatest fear was that as we drifted toward this blindly amorphous world view not only would the entire range of the human spirit be reduced to a more narrow modality of thought but we would wake from a dream having forgotten that there were even other possibilities of life itself. The other peoples of the world aren't failed attempts of being us, they are unique answers to a fundamental question. What does it mean to be human? And the reason this is so important is that culture is not trivial. Culture is not decorative, it's not the songs we sing, and it's not the robes we wear. Fundamentally culture is about a body of ethical and moral values that every culture places around the individual to keep at bay the barbaric heart that history so sadly teaches us lies beneath the surface of every human being. Its cultured that

allows us to make sense out of sensation to find order and meaning in the universe. Its culture that allows us as Lincoln said to always seek the better angels of our nature. And if you want to know what happens when culture is lost when through volition or coercion the individual turns their back on the constraints of traditional often to be cast into a world of disaffection and alienation perhaps in pursuit of a world of affluence that the individual may aspire to but rarely achieve and instead finds him or herself simply on the lowest rank of economic ladder that goes nowhere, you simply have to look around the world to the points of chaos. The butt naked brigades in Liberia, the eastern Congo where rape is a systematic weapon of war, the insanity of the shinning path of the gates of Lima or the malice in Katmandu. Culture is not trivial. Culture is the glue of civilization. It is culture that allows us to be human and the world is finally waking up to this extraordinary gift of the human imagination thats brought into being by culture. When I was a kid the Inuit in the Arctic people were dismissed as savages. And indeed when the British first went to the Arctic they took the Inuit to be savages. The Inuit took the British to be gods. What the British failed to understand is that there is no better sign of human genius than the ability to survive in a harsh environment on a technology that was limited to what you could make from the cold. The Inuit didnt fear the cold, they took advantage of it. The runners of their sleds were originally made of fish. Three arctic fish are wrapped in frozen, and wrapped in a caribou hide skin and then greased with a stomach content of the caribou. The Inuit didnt fear the cold. They took advantage of it. This photograph I took 250 kilometers out on the sea ice north of the [Indiscernible] in the Canadian arctic. That night the temperature dropped windshield to minus 80 Celsius. These guys made an igloo, survived in a way that I could never have imagined, a people for who blood on ice is not a sign of death but an affirmation of life itself, and Ive often told the story that Ive always thought was apophical when I was narwhal hunting with these Inuit from northern Baffin Island. They told me a story of the dark days of Canadian history when we forced the Inuit into settlements in the 1950s to establish our sovereignty in the Arctic, and this mans grandfather refused to go into the settlement and so fearful for his life they took away off all of his weapons and all of his tools and so what did the old man do, he slipped outside into the Arctic night, pulled down his caribou hide and seal skin trousers, defecated into his hand and the feces began too freeze he shaped it into the form of a blade. As the implement made from human waste took final form, he put a spray of saliva along the leading edge and when the shit knife as its know was finally created from the cold, he used it to kill a dog. He skinned the dog, improvised a harness with the skin of the dead dog, improvised a sled from the rib cage of the dead dog, harnessed up an adjacent living dog and shit knife in belt disappeared into the Arctic night. Now, when I, you talk about getting by with nothing but I thought that was apophical until I read in the journals of Peter Frouken [Phonetic] whose with [Indiscernible] expedition and Froukens [Phonetic] in the blizzard and to protect himself he puts a, digs a trough in the snow, pulls a sled on top and then becomes encased in ice in a coffin of his own making and a very off handed way in his primary journal says, I thought of making a shit knife but I couldnt really maneuver. So, but the tragedy in all of this finally tonight is that having endured so much in a way that the Inuit are a symbol of culture survival and adaptation now they are confronting something thats beyond their capacity to control. This is a photograph taken in Qaanaaq the