

# The Wayfinders: Why Ancient Wisdom Matters in the Modern World (CBC Massey Lectures)

## Wade Davis

*Together the myriad of cultures makes up an intellectual and spiritual web of life that envelops the planet and is every bit as important to the well being of the planet as is the biological web of life that we know as the biosphere. You might think of this social web of life as an “ethnosphere,” a term perhaps best defined as the sum total of all thoughts and intuitions, myths and beliefs, ideas and inspirations brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness. The ethnosphere is humanity’s greatest legacy. It is the product of our dreams, the embodiment of our hopes, the symbol of all we are and all that we, as a wildly inquisitive and astonishingly adaptive species, have created.*

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loc 47

*The world can only appear monochromatic to those who persist in interpreting what they experience through the lens of a single cultural paradigm, their own. For those with the eyes to see and the heart to feel, it remains a rich and complex topography of the spirit.*

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loc 91

*That the Polynesians had occupied these islands was self-evident. Explanations for how they had done so exemplified what the poet Walt Whitman meant when he wrote that history is the swindle of the schoolmasters.*

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loc 502

*Heyerdahl was so loose with his interpretations, and so casual with chronology, that his theory, as one scholar has suggested, was equivalent to a modern historian claiming that: “America was discovered in the last days of the Roman Empire by King Henry VIII, who brought a*

*Ford Thunderbird to the benighted aborigines.” But none of this mattered. Heyerdahl’s story was a sensation and his book, Kon-Tiki, went on to sell more than 20 million copies.*

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loc 539

*The navigator by day conceptually divides the horizon ahead and behind, each into sixteen parts, taking as cardinal points the rising and setting of the sun. Thus by day he or she replicates the star compass of the night. The metaphor is that the Hokule’a never moves. It simply waits, the axis mundi of the world, as the islands rise out of the sea to greet her.*

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loc 669

*“When you lose a language,” the MIT linguist Ken Hale remarked not long before he passed away, “you lose a culture, intellectual wealth, a work of art. It’s like dropping a bomb on the Louvre.”*

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loc 84

*Science is only one way of knowing, and its purpose is not to generate absolute truths but rather to inspire better and better ways of thinking about phenomena.*

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loc 211

*Expert navigators like Mau, sitting alone in the darkness of the hull of a canoe, can sense and distinguish as many as five distinct swells moving through the vessel at any given time. Local wave action is chaotic and disruptive. But the distant swells are consistent, deep and resonant pulses that move across the ocean from one star house to another, 180 degrees away, and thus can be used as yet another means of orienting the vessel in time and space. Should the canoe shift course in the middle of the night, the navigator will know, simply from the change of the pitch and roll of the waves. Even more remarkable is the navigator’s ability to pull islands out of the sea. The truly great navigators such as Mau can identify the presence of distant atolls of islands beyond the visible horizon simply by watching the reverberation of waves across the hull of the canoe, knowing full well that every island group in the Pacific*

*has its own refractive pattern that can be read with the same ease with which a forensic scientist would read a fingerprint. All of this is extraordinary, each one of these individual skills and intuitions a sign of a certain brilliance. But as we isolate, deconstruct, even celebrate these specific intellectual and observational gifts, we run the risk of missing the entire point, for the genius of Polynesian navigation lies not in the particular but in the whole, the manner in which all of these points of information come together in the mind of the wayfinder. It is one thing, for example, to measure the speed of the Hokule'a with a simple calculation: the time a bit of foam or flotsam, or perhaps a mere bubble, takes to pass the known length separating the crossbeams of the canoe. Three seconds and the speed will be 8.5 knots; fifteen seconds and the vessel slogs at a mere 1.5 knots. But it is quite another to make such calculations continually, day and night, while also taking the measure of stars breaking the horizon, winds shifting both in speed and direction, swells moving through the canoe, clouds and waves. The science and art of navigation is holistic. The navigator must process an endless flow of data, intuitions and insights derived from observation and the dynamic rhythms and interactions of wind, waves, clouds, stars, sun, moon, the flight of birds, a bed of kelp, the glow of phosphorescence on a shallow reef — in short, the constantly changing world of weather and the sea. What is even more astonishing is that the entire science of wayfinding is based on dead reckoning. You only know where you are by knowing precisely where you have been and how you got to where you are. One's position at any one time is determined solely on the basis of distance and direction travelled since leaving the last known point. "You don't look up at the stars and know where you are," Nainoa told me, "you need to know where you have come from by memorizing from where you sailed."*

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loc 675

*Navigators do not sleep. They remain monk-like, undisturbed by the crew, with no mundane tasks to perform, sitting alone on a special perch at the stern of the vessel, tracking with their minds.*

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loc 702

*"If you can read the ocean," Mau once told Nainoa, "if you can see the island in your mind, you will never get lost."*

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loc 704

*Wealth was not defined as ownership, but by the prestige and status that came to one who gave well and thus secured a social network, a sort of human capital of culture, a treasury of ritual debts and obligations that would yield interest to one's clan and family forever.*

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loc 875

*Everything on earth is held together by Songlines, everything is subordinate to the Dreaming, which is constant but ever changing. Every landmark is wedded to a memory of its origins, and yet always being born. Every animal and object resonates with the pulse of an ancient event, while still being dreamed into being. The world as it exists is perfect, though constantly in the process of being formed. The land is encoded with everything that has ever been, everything that ever will be, in every dimension of reality. To walk the land is to engage in a constant act of affirmation, an endless dance of creation.*

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loc 1662

*"The ideal of a single civilization for everyone implicit in the cult of progress and technique impoverishes and mutilates us. Every view of the world that becomes extinct, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life." — Octavio Paz*

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loc 1787

*The problem is not change. We have this conceit in the West that while we have been celebrating and developing technological wizardry, somehow the other peoples of the world have been static and intellectually idle. Nothing could be further from the truth. Change is the one constant in history. All peoples in all places are always dancing with new possibilities for life. Nor is technology per se a threat to the integrity of culture. The Lakota did not stop being Sioux when they gave up the bow and arrow for the rifle any more than a rancher from Medicine Hat ceased being a Canadian when he gave up the horse and buggy in favour of the automobile. It is neither change nor technology that threatens the integrity of culture. It is power, the crude face of domination. We have this idea that these indigenous peoples, these distant others, quaint and colourful though they may be, are somehow*

*destined to fade away, as if by natural law, as if they are failed attempts at being modern, failed attempts at being us. This is simply not true. In every case these are dynamic living peoples being driven out of existence by identifiable and overwhelming external forces. This is actually an optimistic observation, for it suggests that if human beings are the agents of cultural destruction, we can also be the facilitators of cultural survival.*

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loc 1835

*Genocide, the physical extermination of a people, is universally condemned. Ethnocide, the destruction of a people's way of life, is in many quarters sanctioned and endorsed as appropriate development policy.*

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loc 1888

*The Penan explicitly perceive wealth as the strength of social relations among people, for should these relationships weaken or fray, all will suffer. Should conflict lead to a schism and families go their separate ways for prolonged periods, both groups may starve for want of sufficient hunters. Thus, as in many hunting and gathering societies, direct criticism of another is frowned upon. The priority is always the solidarity of the group. Confrontation and displays of anger are exceedingly rare. Civility and humour are the norm. There is no word for "thank you" in their language because sharing is an obligation. One never knows who will be the next to bring food to the fire. I once gave a cigarette to an elderly woman and watched as she tore it apart to distribute equitably the individual strands of tobacco to each shelter in the encampment, rendering the product useless but honouring her duty to share.*

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loc 1919

*I met an elderly Buddhist nun whose feet and hands had been severed from her body during the era of Pol Pot and the killing fields. Her crime had been her faith, and her punishment the barbaric response of a regime and an ideology that denied all nuances of spiritual belief and indeed the very notion of ethnicity and culture. Reducing the infinite permutations of human society and consciousness to a simple opposition of owners and workers, capitalist and proletariat, Marxism, formulated by*

*a German philosopher in the Reading Room of the British Library, was in a sense the perfect triumph of the mechanistic view of existence inspired by Descartes.*

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loc 1980

*Western science and efficiency has made a major contribution to minor needs.*

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loc 2020

*BEFORE SHE DIED , anthropologist Margaret Mead spoke of her singular fear that, as we drift toward a more homogenous world, we are laying the foundations of a blandly amorphous and singularly generic modern culture that will have no rivals. The entire imagination of humanity, she feared, might be confined within the limits of a single intellectual and spiritual modality. Her nightmare was the possibility that we might wake up one day and not even remember what had been lost. Our species has been around for some 200,000 years. The Neolithic Revolution, which gave us agriculture, and with it surplus, hierarchy, specialization, and sedentary life, occurred only ten to twelve thousand years ago. Modern industrial society as we know it is scarcely 300 years old. This shallow history should not suggest to any of us that we have all the answers for all of the challenges that will confront us as a species in the coming millennia. The goal is not to freeze people in time. One cannot make a rainforest park of the mind. Cultures are not museum pieces; they are communities of real people with real needs. The question, as Hugh Brody has written, is not the traditional versus the modern, but the right of free peoples to choose the components of their lives. The point is not to deny access, but rather to ensure that all peoples are able to benefit from the genius of modernity on their own terms, and without that engagement demanding the death of their ethnicity.*

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loc 2119

*whether you identify it by the monikers westernization, globalization, capitalism, democracy, or free trade — is but an expression of our cultural values. It is not some objective force removed from the constraints of culture. And it is certainly not the true and only pulse of*

history. It is merely a constellation of beliefs, convictions, economic paradigms that represent one way of doing things, of going about the complex process of organizing human activities. Our achievements to be sure have been stunning, our technological innovations dazzling. The development within the last century of a modern, scientific system of medicine alone represents one of the greatest episodes in human endeavour. Sever a limb in a car accident and you won't want to be taken to an herbalist. But these accomplishments do not make the Western paradigm exceptional or suggest in any way that it has or ought to have a monopoly on the path to the future. An anthropologist from a distant planet landing in the United States would see many wondrous things. But he or she or it would also encounter a culture that reveres marriage, yet allows half of its marriages to end in divorce; that admires its elderly, yet has grandparents living with grandchildren in only 6 percent of its households; that loves its children, yet embraces a slogan — "twenty-four/seven" — that implies total devotion to the workplace at the expense of family. By the age of eighteen, the average American youth has spent two years watching television. One in five Americans is clinically obese and 60 percent are overweight, in part because 20 percent of all meals are consumed in automobiles and a third of children eat fast food every day. The country manufactures 200 million tons of industrial chemicals each year, while its people consume two-thirds of the world's production of antidepressant drugs. The four hundred most prosperous Americans control more wealth than 2.5 billion people in the poorest eighty-one nations with whom they share the planet. The nation spends more money on armaments and war than the collective military budgets of its seventeen closest rivals. The state of California spends more money on prisons than on universities. Technological wizardry is balanced by the embrace of an economic model of production and consumption that compromises the life supports of the planet. Extreme would be one word for a civilization that contaminates with its waste the air, water, and soil; that drives plants and animals to extinction on a scale not seen on earth since the disappearance of the dinosaurs; that dams the rivers, tears down the ancient forests, empties the seas of fish, and does little to curtail industrial processes that threaten to transform the chemistry and physics of the atmosphere. Our way of life, inspired in so many ways, is not the paragon of humanity's potential. Once we look through the anthropological lens and see, perhaps for the first time, that all cultures have unique attributes that reflect choices made over generations, it becomes absolutely clear that there is no universal progression in the lives and destiny of human beings. Were societies to be ranked on the basis of technological prowess, the Western scientific experiment, radiant and brilliant, would no doubt come out on top. But if the criteria of excellence shifted, for example to the capacity to thrive in a

*truly sustainable manner, with a true reverence and appreciation for the earth, the Western paradigm would fail. If the imperatives driving the highest aspirations of our species were to be the power of faith, the reach of spiritual intuition, the philosophical generosity to recognize the varieties of religious longing, then our dogmatic conclusions would again be found wanting.*

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loc 2135

*The fate of the vast majority of those who sever their ties with their traditions will not be to attain the prosperity of the West, but to join the legions of urban poor, trapped in squalor, struggling to survive. As cultures wither away, individuals remain, often shadows of their former selves, caught in time, unable to return to the past, yet denied any real possibility of securing a place in a world whose values they seek to emulate and whose wealth they long to acquire. This creates a dangerous and explosive situation, which is precisely why the plight of diverse cultures is not a simple matter of nostalgia or even of human rights alone, but a serious issue of geopolitical stability and survival.*

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loc 2181

*artifice, the songs we sing or even the prayers we chant. It is a blanket of comfort that gives meaning to lives. It is a body of knowledge that allows the individual to make sense out of the infinite sensations of consciousness, to find meaning and order in a universe that ultimately has neither. Culture is a body of laws and traditions, a moral and ethical code that insulates a people from the barbaric heart that history suggests lies just beneath the surface of all human societies and indeed all human beings. Culture alone allows us to reach, as Abraham Lincoln said, for the better angels of our nature.*

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loc 2187

*Despair is a sin against the imagination.*

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loc 2324

*Our economic models are projections and arrows when they should be*

*circles. To define perpetual growth on a finite planet as the sole measure of economic well-being is to engage in a form of slow collective suicide.*

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loc 2400