

Unit I: Aboriginal Spirituality

Name: _____

In-Class Assignment “The Cave”

There was a whole tribe of people living in the cave. They had been there longer than the oldest member could recall. The cave was high-ceilinged and very long, large enough for the tribe's flock of sheep to graze on the moss. The members of the tribe took turns keeping the dung fire burning continuously. For without it, all would be dark as coal. Temperature in the cave was a constant 60⁰ but with sheepskins and the fire, no one ever felt the chill. A stream of water suitable for drinking gurgled through one end of the cave. The tribesmen measured time by the ebb and flow of water. Life was peaceful in the cave, and largely uneventful, except for the occasional births and deaths. No one in the cave ever wondered what went on in the world outside, because they weren't aware that there was anything out there.

One teenager in the tribe, however, gradually began to wonder what was beyond the cave. His parents told him to forget such a silly idea.

“Be grateful for what you have,” they admonished him. “Don't waste time wondering about things that don't exist.”

“But I'm bored,” the boy shrugged. “Nothing unexpected ever happens.” He began to walk away.

“Go search for coloured rocks,” his dad called after him.

“Or work on the loom for me,” suggested his mother.

Over his shoulder he called, “I think I'll go for a swim.” The boy strolled toward the farthest wall of the enclosure. “That stream must come from somewhere,” he muttered.

For weeks he had been practicing holding his breath as long as he could. Occasionally he had been able to last a full minute. He hadn't told a single other person he was practicing in order to swim as far as he could in the underground waters. He was afraid that they wouldn't approve. He figured that when he did try, it would be better to start out swimming upstream, so if he tired, he could come back with the current.

“The stream probably broadens out and gets shallow in spots,” he surmised. “I can probably catch my breath there.”

He even had a sort of wet suit made from sheep intestines to keep him from freezing in the icy water. The only detail that he neglected was to plan the exact day he'd take the plunge. One day the boredom would seem overwhelming, he knew, and he would accept the silent invitation of the rushing water.

Today was the day, he resolved, as he approached the stream. No use waiting any longer. He stripped off his woolly outer garment, and dove in where the stream entered the cave. The water was black and inhospitable. Deliberately he swam, trying to conserve energy against the cold. The meters slipped by gradually. Again and again he lifted his head to the surface, searching for any pockets. Each time he scraped against the rock ceiling, until his lungs threatened to explode. He had to have air. Panic squeezed him. Up jerked his head one last time. No bump! Air! Great mouthfuls of air! He lowered his feet and touched bottom with his head still out of the water. He rested.

“How much farther do I dare to go on?” he paused to think. “I'll try one more section and then go back if I don't find anything.”

Face down again into the ripples. Arms wind milling. Then, after a short distance, straight into the rocky side wall. He was puzzled for a moment until he opened his eyes and noticed that the stream had turned sharply. Noticed? Yes, he actually could see that the walls curved. Very faintly of course, but still, even a hint of light increased his excitement. Forgetting his aching lungs, he trashed ahead, toward the light. Brighter and clearer the water became. Just fresh, different from the cave air. Green was everywhere except straight overhead, where all was blue and white. Everything was shining in the bright light.

The cave boy was overwhelmed. He swam ashore and stood with his arms out, soaking up the warmth. He could hardly believe how beautiful it all seemed. Even rock crystals in the firelight were no match for the foliage and the sky. Then suddenly he remembered, "I must go back and tell the others."

The swim back seemed only to last a minute. The current helped him along, but enthusiasm helped even more. He practically leaped out of the water when he reached the cave again. Screaming, he ran to the fire, and the rest of the tribe clambered toward him to see what the matter was.

"I've found where the stream comes from," he shouted eagerly.

"Calm down, boy," demanded his father, who is also happened to be the tribe's leader. "What are you talking about?"

"I swam upstream as far as I could, and I came out into a whole new world."

"Impossible!" snorted his father over the hubbub of the crowd. "This," his arm swept across the cave like a dial of a compass, "is the whole world."

"No, it's not," insisted the boy. He wiped his dripping hair back on his head and moved a little closer to the fire. "The stream travels a long way. Then it curves and opens into a large pool. And around it and above it ... such beauty! Green and blue, and ..." He closed his eyes, lifted his head slightly, and let his voice trail off, as he remembered.

"Your imagination is running wild," harrumphed his father.

"He's bumped his head on a rock," someone yelled out.

A few people in the crowd began to snicker. "And dancing stalagmites, too we suppose?"

"There's nothing wrong with me," insisted the boy. "I've seen things you've never dreamed of. And if you'll follow me upstream, I'll show them to you. Little flying animals, plants as high as this cave growing from the ground, and overhead, puffs of smoke floating by, whiter than wool."

"Preposterous!" pronounced his father.

"The lad is touched," crackled an old hag, who turned and hobbled away. Many others in the tribe mumbled aloud.

"He doesn't sound as if he made it up," said one.

"But we all know there's nothing outside this cave," retorted another.

While a third reminded them both of the old cave proverb, "Dreaming never got a sheep sheared."

“Well, we’ve all heard enough for now about this amazing other world,” proclaimed the boy’s father as he assumed his most dignified leader’s demeanor. “I propose we sleep on the matter and tomorrow we’ll talk more about it. Everybody off to bed now. Go!”

The tribe dispersed rather reluctantly, each to his own sleeping place. But the elders hung back. Instead of retiring, they huddled near the fire for a consultation on how to handle the whole affair.

The members of the tribe awoke the next morning to find out what conclusion had been reached. The elders called everyone together for the pronouncement.

“We have all decided,” began the boy’s father in the most officious voice at his command, “that no further talk of the kind we heard yesterday will be tolerated ever again in this cave.”

“But father ...” pleaded the boy swimmer, surprised and hurt by the rebuff.

His father rumbled on, refusing even to acknowledge his son. Fairy tales such as we heard yesterday can accomplish nothing but harm to our life here in this cave. We have everything we could want here, food, clothing, companionship, peace, everything.”

“Especially boredom, stagnation, and death,” sulked the boy.

“Silence!” bellowed the spokesman. “We’ll have no more such interruptions,” he threatened. “The matter is settled. The stream has no beginning or end. It just is... right here for us. The world begins and ends with our cave. We’re all happy here. And to make certain that no one else tries to duplicate my son’s foolishness, a fence of sheep bones will be fastened across the stream’s entrance. Anyone who dares to go against this decision will be severely punished. Our life here is a happy one, and we want to make sure that it continues that way.”

“You mean,” wailed the boy, “that if we ignore the outside world, it will somehow go away?”

“It does not exist,” thundered the leader. He pierced the boy with a menacing finger. “It’s only in your mind. Get-it-out of your mind and get-back-to-cave business before you ruin everything that your grandparents and your parents have worked so hard build up. Am I making myself clear?”

“Perfectly,” replied the boy, as his shoulders wilted.

“All right, then.” He attempted a weak joke so the unpleasant assembly could end on a cheerful note. “Let’s keep our hands and not our minds busy woolgathering.”

Days went by normally. Sheep grazed. Dung burned. Tribe members inhaled and exhaled. The swimmer kept to himself. He knew that he was somehow different from all the others now. His unique experience meant he no longer fit in as just another member of the tribe. He could never again be satisfied with cave life. Its sterility oppressed him. He knew that someday he would have to return to the source of the stream, even at the cost of his family and friends, He tried to force the idea from his mind, but it wouldn’t go away. The memory of those vivid colors, those enticing smells, was too strong. He had to go back.

One night he did. After everyone was asleep, he cautiously loosened the binding of the bone fence, took one last gulp of cavern air and was gone. Never to return. The tribe was shocked the next morning when they discovered his departure. But the elders forbade mention of the fugitive. The official explanation for his disappearance was death by drowning, and swimming in the stream was from then on strongly

discouraged. After a few years, even the boy's father hardly recalled his son. Cave life plodded on relentlessly. A few deaths. A courtship and marriage. A few births. The boy's discovery had virtually passed out of the tribal memory.

Then one day, curled up in front of the fire, a teenage girl hesitantly whispered to her mother, "I wonder if there really could be anything beyond this cave?"

Questions:

1. What made the cave so hospitable? (2 Marks)

2. What motivated the boy to swim in the underground waters? (2 Marks)

3. What news did the boy bring back to the tribe? (2 Marks)

4. Outline the tribe's reactions. (2 Marks)

5. What conclusions did the elders reach the next day? What actions did they take? (5 Marks)

6. What happened to the boy after the decision was reached by the elders? (2 Marks)

7. How did the tribe deal with what the boy did? Why did they make this decision? (5 Marks)

8. What happened at the end of the story? (2 Marks)

9. What do YOU think is the meaning behind this story? (5 Marks)

10. What does it symbolize about humans? (4 Marks)
