

AVATAR Reveals What We Are Missing

by Randall L. Eaton, Ph.D.

Hollywood has given us a top box office attraction that reveals exactly what we are missing. In the midst of a global crisis, the timing couldn't be better. AVATAR strongly promotes the virtues of a sacred life close to nature.

The drama reminds us of the bloody history of European colonization of North America. The Navi people of Pandora are fashioned much like Native American hunting cultures with their deep respect for nature, the creatures, their planet and their god.

The film's hero is Jake Sulley, a marine whose mind remotely directs a Navi body genetically engineered to befriend the Navi, learn their ways and encourage them to move away from the mineral-rich ground. His first entry into Navi territory finds him under attack by a pack of viper wolves, but he is rescued by a female Navi named Neytiri who skillfully kills many of them.

As Neytiri dispatches the wounded predators, she apologizes to them. When Jake thanks her for saving his life, she insists that thanks are wrong, that it is sad that the wolves died. She blames their death on Jake whom she compares to a baby whose ignorance attracted the wolves in the first place.

Reluctantly, Neytiri takes Jake with her to the tribe after nature spirits, resembling airborne jellyfish, collect all over his body, a sign to her that Jake is worthy.

As in all hunting-gathering cultures, a male earns the status of manhood and marriage by proving himself worthy on the hunting field. Eventually, Neytiri mentors Jake in his rite of passage and he kills a larger herbivore which he ritually blesses and thanks.

The film honors tribal life, nature connection and spirituality, not only of the foraging peoples on earth, but of the ancestors of all civilized people. The rich life of the Navi is a spectacular and beautiful appeal to our soul, a poignant reminder of what our culture is desperately missing.

The greatest disease in civilization is loneliness. Millions of people crammed into cities are living without authentic society. A recent U.N. study indicated that altogether civilized people feel powerless about politics, that their culture is rootless, economics is ruthless and the environment is futureless. In short, civilized humanity is without meaning and hope.

James Cameron's epic film points us back to nature, and in doing so it gives new relevance to the foraging lifestyle and its direct participation in the food chain. It also reminds us of the absolute necessity of getting kids outdoors.

I spent much of my life recruiting volunteers to the wilderness of British Columbia to study orca whales. We fished regularly and I took many people fishing for the first time in their lives. Following Native American traditions, we always blessed and gave thanks to each salmon and to the Spirit of the Salmon Nation when we killed one, while we prepared it and when we ate it.

Around the campfire at night it was not uncommon for a volunteer to say, "I'll bet you're not a hunter." I would respond, "Why do you say that?" "Well, because you're into whales," implying that if I care about whales I must be anti-hunting. I would comment that fishing is hunting with a hook, that if it is OK for orcas to catch and eat salmon, then why not me?

Over the years it became clear that for many volunteers the most transformative influence of spending time in the wilderness was direct participation in the food chain.

My in-depth studies of the psycho-spiritual dimensions of recreational hunting indicate that a lifetime in the outdoors teaches universal virtues including inner peace and humility. Inner peace is the goal of spiritual and religious traditions across time and space, and humility is knowing we are part of something greater than ourselves, powerful medicine in a world obsessed with egoism.

Through questionnaires I discovered over 80% of the recreational hunters surveyed pray to the Creator or to the animal when they take its life, just like Native American hunters and the Navi. My survey also revealed that hunters feel sadness when taking the lives of animals, like the Navi.

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Nearly all recreational hunters describe their feelings toward animals they hunt as respect, admiration and reverence. Hunting teaches us respect for life, connects us profoundly to nature and morally obliges us to be responsible conservationists. The Hunter's Hall of Fame includes luminaries such as Thomas Jefferson, Audubon, Thoreau, Roosevelt, Steinbeck, Aldo Leopold and Jimmy Carter.

Hunters are the original conservationists and they still lead in that field. The National Wildlife Federation, for example, is the world's largest conservation organization and it was started and is still backed by hunters.

While speaking on a national radio show about orca whales the host asked me what we could do to protect cetaceans from whaling and pollution of the seas. I emphasized the value of hunting and fishing to the development of young people and the conservation ethic. A woman phoned in and blurted out, "You're just teaching kids violence." I replied, "What do you think Jimmy Carter and Nelson Mandela would say about that? They both won the Nobel peace prize and both are avid hunters."

While hunting is the ideal way to teach young people universal virtues including patience, generosity, courage and fortitude, our boys especially still need rites of passage to become men of heart. As the original rite of passage, hunting is an ideal way to open the male heart. So are wilderness survival and vision quest.

I once asked Felix Ike, a Western Shoshone elder, what kind of country this would be if the majority of men in it had been properly initiated to hunting. He replied, "It would be a totally different world."

The military force on Pandora epitomizes the pridefulness of contemporary civilized humanity, its separation from nature and its unsustainable lifestyle. If we are to survive our insane lifestyle of materialism in which the meaning of life is measured by what we own, then it is critical that we examine what we are missing that would make a

difference in how we view life and relate to other people, the earth, the creatures and the divine.

How destructive to human development is industrialized birthing? Is it true that Infants who do not nurse from their mothers are deprived of the most important bonding process in life? Does lack of bonding between infant and mother result in inability to bond with spouse and children, i.e., broken homes? Can unbonded children grow up to bond with and care for the earth? Does lack of early bonding generate insecurity, separation, selfishness and egoism, even crime and violence?

How important is bonding with nature? Playing outdoors? Can children who develop without nature connection become caretakers of the earth and all things wild? Who is there to mentor that connection? There are more elders than ever, but what has become of elders who mentor younger?

The word “community” is heard a lot these days, but how many of us grow up with an extended family, much less an authentic society? How can we recover the fundamental fabric of tribal life with its interdependence?

Does a driver’s license or letter in football constitute a legitimate rite of passage, one that produces men of heart?

The survey I did also asked hunters, men and woman alike with the average of 55, what life event most opened their hearts and engendered compassion in them? Choices included becoming a parent, the death of a loved one, death of a beloved pet, teaching young people and taking the life of an animal. Nearly all the woman chose “becoming a parent.” Most of the men chose “taking the life of an animal.” Which implies that a woman’s greatest initiation to life is birthing child and a man’s is hunting. Women are adapted on every level to bring life into the world, but men are adapted to take life to serve life, something every foraging culture knows.

The interdependence of life is not merely an intellectual concept. It is intelligence of the heart which comes from connection with nature including direct participation in the food chain.

We owe it to ourselves and our world to rephrase the meaning of life as sacred. If we want our children to live from their hearts and take care of the world on which they depend then it is critically important that they participate directly in the most fundamental processes of life for which there are no substitutes. If they do not hunt they should fish. If they do not fish they should gather. If they do not gather they should grow.

AVATAR is a model for the recovery of proper relationship with the earth, the creatures, other people and the divine. Back to Nature means coming home to the

Heart. It means recovering those elements of life exemplified by our ancestors and foraging cultures including the indigenous hunting cultures of the sea, the dolphins and orcas, which, like pygmies and Kalahari Bushman, are playful, peaceful, present and compassionate living harmoniously with their world and us, their worst nightmare.