

March 17, 2024

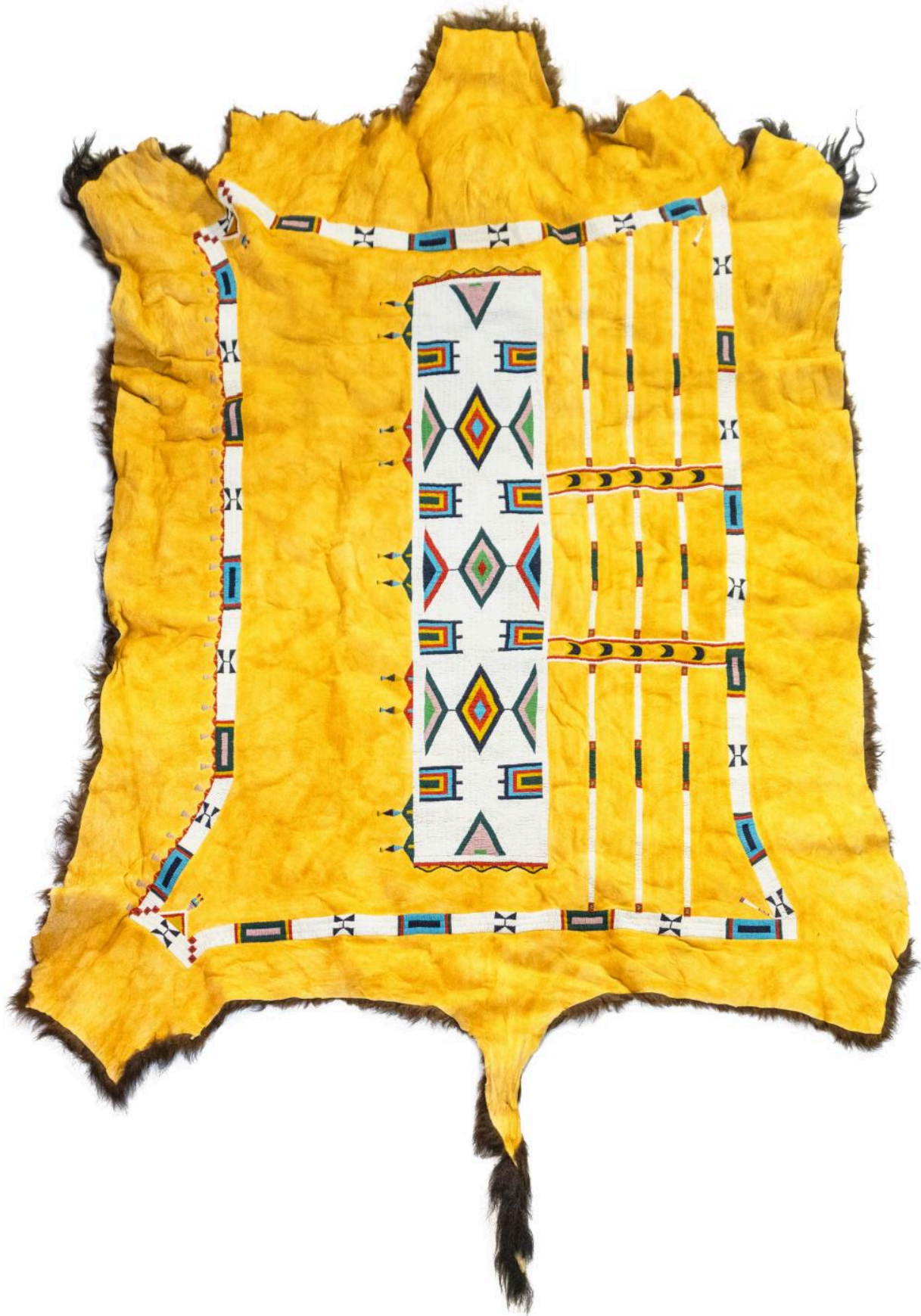
Containment and Boundlessness

Good morning. I would like to follow the story of the Empty Pot with another old story. This version was recorded in 1967, as it was told by Jenny Leading Cloud, a Lakota storyteller. I hear that other versions of this same story are told by other tribes, some details may vary, but the the essential elements are the same:

“Somewhere at a place where the prairie and the Badlands meet, there is a hidden cave. Not for a long, long time has anyone been able to find it. Even now, with so many highways, cars and tourists, no one has discovered this cave. In it lives a woman so old that her face looks like a shriveled-up walnut. She is dressed in rawhide, the way people used to before the white man came. She has been sitting there for a thousand years or more, working on a blanket strip for her buffalo robe. She is making the strip out of dyed porcupine quills, the way ancestors did before the white traders brought glass beads to this turtle continent. Resting beside her, licking his paws, watching her all the time is Shunka Sapa, a huge black dog. His eyes never wander from the old woman, whose teeth are worn flat, worn down to little stumps, she has used them to flatten so many porcupine quills.

A few steps from where the old woman sits working on her blanket strip, a huge fire is kept going. She lit this fire a thousand or more years ago and has kept it alive ever since. Over the fire hangs a big earthen pot, the kind some Indian peoples used to make before the white man came with his kettles of iron. Inside the pot, wojapi is boiling and bubbling. Wojapi is berry soup, good and sweet and red. That soup has been boiling in the pot for a long time, ever since the fire was lit.

Every now and then the old woman gets up to stir the wojapi in the huge earthen pot. She is so old and feeble that it takes a while to get up and hobble over to the fire. The moment her back is turned, Shunka Sapa, the huge black dog starts pulling the porcupine quills out of her blanket strip. This way she never makes any progress, and her quillwork remains forever unfinished. The Sioux people used to say that if the old woman ever finishes her blanket strip, then at the very moment that she threads the last porcupine quill to complete the design, the world will come to an end.”



Okay! We've had two good stories, both of them involving pots. Now I'd like you to please think of your favorite vessel...

Is it a coffee mug? An enameled cast iron dutch oven?

A porcelain plant pot? Your hot tub?

Sometimes Sonja likes to play the "everything is an apple" game.

"Everything is an apple." She says, then she describes how some particular thing has an outside, and an inside, and you can sink your teeth into it if you try hard enough. That's a pretty broad definition of what makes something an apple, but we all entertain ourselves in different ways.

Let's us play a game: "everything is a pot." The Universe - contains all matter and energy. Galaxy's contain innumerable asteroids, comets, planets, stars, quasars, and even black holes. The earth contains rocks, water, air and life. What is life but sets of containers interacting with other containers.

The word contain has the Latin root *tenere* - to hold. A container holds things together. Nothing is static, things are always changing. So when we see and describe systems of containment, it is always containment in the face of the boundlessness of time. Look at the most elemental example of how matter is brought together in a star. The more matter the star contains, the brighter it burns, and the faster it transforms into something else. The polar forces of containment and boundlessness move about an axis of transformation.

Boundlessness may be too hard for us to realistically conceptualize. Perhaps emanation is a more useful concept, the radiation of something into the world. A container has a profound effect on that which emanates from it. When a container's shape is in accordance with the patterns of energy within it, the emanations are amplified. This is called a resonant chamber, and these resonant emanations are transformational to the world. Some examples of resonant chambers: musical instruments, rocket engines, individual

organisms, entire species, and whole ecosystems. Depending on how we define the parameters of the container, we find resonance within all of these things, and we especially see in the emanations of life a boundless expanse of potential.

But what makes some one thing that we define, contained in-and-of-itself, separate from other things in the world around it? It seems that we can only *know* one thing from another while dwelling in the midst of our perception. The time-bound containers we build within our minds delineate the world into this and that. The thought that all of this is an illusion, that the encyclopedic differentiations we make among all things is but a dream, is an awful thought - because the mind is awesome. The power of thought, emanating into the world, has profound consequences for our short and challenging lives, and for the lives of our fellow beings on this planet. But we don't know how else to be but hopeful.

So our stories, of the Empty Pot, and The Old Woman with the Black Dog, lead me to two questions:

Why is Ping's pot radically transformational, even though it is empty?

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What does the old woman have cooking in her pot at the back of the cave?

On its surface, the story of the Empty Pot is one about the rewards of honesty. The story is called the Empty Pot, but really I think it should be called the Cooked Seed. There is something beyond a lesson in honesty, there is the Taoistic teaching of accepting our lack of control - on the letting go of desire.

A seed is - *I hope you know what I'm going to say*- a seed is a container! Within it the genetic resonance of the plant has been prepared for emanation. Planting the cooked seed is a test of our ability to face the starkness of reality. Our gift from the emperor *is* the lack inherent in the universe. We are mortal,

and the universe is indifferent to our superficial strivings. The world is fundamentally incomplete. To dwell in acceptance of the lack is our only access to the fullness of reality. By letting go of the desire to produce a beautiful result, the path opens to radical transformation. Here is where beauty enters back in, without trying.

The old woman in the cave is the timeless generative force, the spirit of life. She tends the transformative fire that burns within all things. The pot at the back of the cave bubbles with the goodness, sweetness, and vigor of life. This is a joyful timeless porridge. The old woman in the cave has had that huge black dog as her constant companion since the beginning. Chaos will always be with us. And the pattern she weaves is the same one that brings wonder and delight to artists, scientists, and all lovers of the natural world. You might at first think that the old woman would resent or even hate the huge black dog for undoing her work, but I imagine that if she scolds the dog, she does so playfully, that she sets back to the work with gentle chiding. She loves the old dog, her constant companion, for giving her another chance at weaving the world into ever more beautiful forms. Hope is impossible without uncertainty. There is no such thing as a completion to the world, there was never and will never be a perfect, unadulterated wholeness. It is not in spite of chaos, but in conversation with it that the pattern of all things is woven into inexpressible beauty.

The work of being in the world will never be done. It began before the rocks beneath our feet were formed, and it will continue long after our sun swallows the earth. The extinction of the great dinosaurs was just one, and not the worst of many cataclysms which have befallen the lifeforms of our planet. Life seems to define itself through its ability to defy the broad lifelessness of the immense cosmos. I believe that our own conscious awareness stems from

life's wild, hopeful defiance of death, as the song says, "but for the rebel in our breast we had remained as brutes."

Across the vastness of time, it is the work of being in the world that threads together every moment across a tapestry of ceaseless transformation. Our bodies are containers - emanating desire. We are part of an ancient lineage which has rebelled against death. Our passions often get the better of us, often it hurts to love. The black dog is always right there, licking his paws, watching the spirit of life. Our time in the world is forever fraught with the reality of our incompleteness - the good old days never existed - nor will the communist utopia ever come to be. We fail, and through our failure the world educates itself in the midst of its beautiful, ambiguous unfolding.