Discussion Questions

*Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being*

Eric Madsen (p. vii) writes "Occasionally an author takes bits and pieces of information that many people are more or less familiar with and puts them together in a way that offers new possibilities for understanding events around us." Many people say Harold Napoleon has done that in the book *Yuuyaraq: The Way of the Human Being.*

1. Review the text and the timeline on page 21 and then retell the history of the Yup’ik people. Name an insight about Alaska Native culture that you did not have before you read this section of the book. How could you use this same technique to study your own or another culture?

2. What is *yuuyaraq* and how is *yuuyaraq* taught or transmitted? Imagine that you are a child learning to pick berries, hunt, or preserve fish. Name some things about *yuuyaraq* that you would learn in the process. How would you learn them? How does Harold Napoleon answer the question "What does it mean to be human?"

3. All cultures have unspoken rules for living as well as explanations for everyday and extraordinary events. Review Napoleon’s description of Yup’ik culture. What rules for everyday living does he identify? How do the Yup’ik people explain sickness, hunting, hospitality, gifts, the spirit world, correct behavior between relatives? What happened when westerners violated the rules or disrespected traditional explanations and behavioral norms?

4. Name the causes of the disruption to the traditional Yup’ik way of life. How did the introduction of Christianity disrupt the life of the Yup’ik people? How did economic institutions such as fur trading disrupt the life of the Yup’ik people? What about the institution of western medicine? With words or pictures, describe the relationship between economic and religious changes, western medicine, and changing physical circumstances such as the introduction of new diseases.

5. How does *yuuyaraq* compare to Jewish religious laws regarding food, sexual relations, work, worship, and all other aspects of life? How does *yuuyaraq* compare to the contemporary practices of cruelty-free living, sustainable living, or the food laws of veganism?

6. Napoleon suggests that some of the symptoms the survivors of the Great Deaths experienced are very much like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Look over pages 14 and 20 to identify words and phrases which describe individual suffering. Other scholars expand the PTSD description to encompass the entire culture. Review pages 14-20 again to identify words and descriptions that expand the consequences of the Great Deaths and the appearance of the missionaries and traders to the whole Yup’ik culture. Name other cultures that have experienced similar traumas.
7. How does Yup’ik science compare to western science? Review pages 4-9. Categorize explanations for natural events into religious, scientific, and yuuyaraq explanations. Are you able to identify other explanations?

8. Describe the role of the family, especially parents and elders in teaching yuuyaraq? How was that role disrupted by priests, missionaries, boarding schools, government and medicine? What roles can parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and elders play in healing?

9. Joe Slats (p. 47) and Harold Napoleon insist that municipal and traditional government will have to give up some economic activities in order to bring about healing. Name some of those activities. How hard do you think it would be for individuals and communities to give those up? For each activity you identify, describe the function for the community and individuals in the community. Are there any members of the community who are harmed by the activity? Are there members who benefit and would be harmed if the activity was eliminated? Describe the positive and negative consequence of giving up some of these activities.

10. Maynard Gilam (p. 52) describes the damage to Maaori and Yup’ik cultures by missionaries from non-indigenous religions. Describe some of this damage. What role can the religious outsider take to bring about healing? Why do you think the book was so interesting to Maaori?

11. Look at the description of nallunguaq on page 12. Napoleon says that young people are advised to practice nallunguaq by pretending that serious trauma did not happen or by pretending not to know about it. Is nallunguaq a new behavior that is a response to the great trauma described by Napoleon or a longstanding way of dealing with the trials of everyday life? Can you provide an example of someone from any culture who dealt with a severe trauma in this way? Was it an individual reaction or was it something enforced by the family or culture?

12. Joe Slats (p. 47) writes that some of his students strongly identify with Napoleon’s descriptions. They say that Napoleon could have been writing about their own lives. Are you able to identify any passages that give you the same kind of feeling? Are your experiences limited to something that only happened to you personally or are there economic, social, or historical explanation for your experiences? Would Napoleon’s ideas about healing work in your culture?

13. Review the structure of Napoleon’s essay on pages 1-36. It begins and ends with a personal description. What other forms of writing use this kind of format? Is it a format you could use in your own work?

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