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## GROUNDHOG ORACLES AND THEIR FOREBEARS

### Abstract

Groundhog Day animal weather forecasting ceremonies continue to proliferate around the United States despite a lack of public confidence in the oracles. This essay probes religio-historical and original ethnographic perspectives to offer a psychological argument for why these ceremonies exist. Employing Paul Shepard's notion of a felt loss of sacred, intimate relationships with nonhuman nature, as well as Peter Homans' concept of the monument that enables mourning, this essay argues that groundhog oracles serve as monuments that allow humans experientially to attempt to heal lost sacred relationships with animals like weather forecasting bears, hedgehogs, and badgers.

### Keywords

animal veneration  
Groundhog Day  
mourning  
oracles  
relationships with nature

## Groundhog Oracles and Their Forebears

The people gather in the faint early sunlight of a cool, overcast winter morning, expectantly waiting to greet their hero like Hindu disciples anticipating the *darshan* grace of their guru. The crowd of about 200 people represents a cross-section of the population of the southern United States in terms of diversity of ethnic backgrounds as well as age. Especially conspicuous are many children who wave festive colored pom-poms and carry signs that bear the mantra of the day, "Go Beau!" Although few have touched him or spoken to him directly, they all have come to catch a glimpse of the local celebrity with two honorary doctorate degrees: General Beauregard Lee, the foremost weather forecasting groundhog in the state of Georgia.

"Beau," as he is affectionately known, lives at the Yellow River Game Ranch animal reserve in Lilburn. Forecasting in various incarnations since 1981, he has a small-scale Southern-style plantation property of his own, raised to be at good human viewing level, surrounded by a high chain link fence. The public front of his area comprises roughly 150 square feet (16 square meters) and includes a two-story faux mansion house with columned front verandah. An American flag, faux wind-driven pump, and faux satellite dish adorn his yard, which includes small shrubbery and stones. A sign in his yard indicates his address as "2222 Weathering Heights."

When the time arrives, a musician dressed in a medieval robe blows reveille on a long horn in order to rouse Beau. After this, Chopper, a human dressed as the groundhog mascot for the nearby Gwinnett Braves minor league professional baseball team, rings a loud bell to add to Beau's human alarm clock. Beau, a superstar on this day at least, also has many fans shouting, "Go Beau!," over and over again, increasing the din.

Prompted by an employee of the reserve who is hidden, eventually Beau charges out of the front door of his mansion and the people vigorously hail his appearance with cries and applause. Beau scampers to his left and hides behind his home's decorative shrubbery. It would be understandable if he were startled by the loud crowd and numerous camera flashes and it does not take him long to try to re-enter his home, although he appears to be prevented from doing so by a hidden reserve employee. He wanders back out again, moving first to the left and then to the right, mostly staying as close as he can to his house and pausing behind cover. Eventually he wanders into the open to taste the gourmet food left there just for him.

The master of ceremonies calls out that the temperature is 41 degrees at 7:41 in the morning, adding meteorological nuance to Beau's prediction. Then he announces that in Chopper's judgment, Beau has failed to see his shadow, so spring will come early. At this news, the crowd roars in positive enthusiasm. Then the master of ceremonies leads the crowd in three lively cheers for Beau, after which the ceremony ends and Beau returns to his house.

Despite Beau's local celebrity status, nationally more Americans are acquainted with his famous rival, Punxsutawney Phil, the original high-profile meteorological groundhog in the United States and product of the Pennsylvania Dutch. Settlers to Pennsylvania from southwestern Germany brought with them the folklore of badgers who forecasted the possible end of winter, with the groundhog, or woodchuck, then employed as the chosen weather oracle in Pennsylvania. After this, starting in 1886 the enterprising Clymer H. Freas, editor of the small town Punxsutawney *Spirit* newspaper, used his periodical to develop the idea of Punxsutawney as the "Weather Capital of the World" and its groundhog, Phil, as the "Prognosticators of Prognosticators" (Yoder 2003, 10). Now 15,000 people come to Punxsutawney every February 2 to take part in the festivities surrounding Phil's predictions, national news outlets always cover

Phil's divinations regarding the length of the winter, and a brief national conversation about groundhogs and winter ensues.

Many imitators have arisen to challenge the eminence of Punxsutawney Phil's predictions. Besides Beau, some of Phil's major competitors include Octorara Orphie in Quarryville, Pennsylvania, since 1908; Jimmy the Groundhog in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin, since 1948; and Buckeye Chuck in Marion, Ohio, since the 1970's. Every year new groundhog ceremonies emerge while older ones sometimes disappear, providing a dynamic facet to the current cultural landscape of the United States.

The existence of these ostensibly secular animal oracle ceremonies demands explanation. It could be that Groundhog Day ceremonies proliferate because many Americans genuinely believe the oracles' forecasts. Such would seem to be the case judging from the Creed of Groundhog Faith of the Slumbering Groundhog Lodge of Quarryville:

We believe in the wisdom of the groundhog.  
We declare his intelligence to be of a higher order than that of any other animal.  
We rejoice that he can, and does, foretell with absolute accuracy the weather conditions for the six weeks following each second day of February (Hatch 1978, 139).

However, outside of the playful humor of groundhog lodges, this faith does not appear to be shared. Strengthening anecdotal data, in February 2015 I polled 1,500 randomly-chosen adult internet users in the United States, posing the question, "Do groundhogs like Punxsutawney Phil accurately predict the weather?" Overall only 9.4% ( $\pm 1.5$ ) responded with "yes" and two-thirds said "no," with the rest offering "no opinion." Perhaps it is good that so few people plan their lives around groundhog oracles, as the National Climactic Data Center states that Punxsutawney Phil had a 45% success record between 1988 and 2014 (NOAA National Climactic Data Center

2015), although if one defines the winter season by temperature rather than snowfall, Phil's accuracy rate rises to about 70% (Aaron, Boyd, Curtis, and Sommers 2001, 29).

Alternatively, one reason for these ceremonies might concern their financial lure. Groundhog Day celebrations can attract revenue in the form of admissions to municipal zoos or commercial nature reserves. Tourist dollars flow as well from municipal ceremonies like Punxsutawney's, as every year for a few days the Punxsutawney area doubles in size, with tourists leaving behind resources in hotels, restaurants, and gift shops, although other animal weather oracles attract fewer visitors. This financial explanation for the groundhog ceremony complex remains insufficient on its own, though, since we still must explain why tourists are willing to pay to see an animal compelled into appearing in public on a frosty morning.

A major feature of the celebration may help to explain this economic demand: Groundhog Day's intrinsic fun. For a day children and adults alike appear to suspend their normal disbelief and in imaginative and entertaining ways think of animals like groundhogs as if they were wise prophets. Groundhog Day ceremonies always include speeches that indulge in rich humor, with the groundhog lodges of Pennsylvania hosting elaborate banquets featuring jokes, skits, and groundhog pledges, all intended as tongue-in-cheek jocularity that reinforces Pennsylvania Dutch identity (Yoder 2003, 78). The playful fun even turns dark, as rival groundhogs may be demeaned as false prophets, with mischievous lawsuits threatened for the supposed resulting mental suffering on this count, and groundhog-based political barbs appear in the *Congressional Record* (Aaron, Boyd, Curtis, and Sommers 2001, 26). However, the "it's fun" explanation for Groundhog Day leaves us wanting more. Many activities may be fun; why do contemporary Americans choose for fun to disturb a rodent during its winter hibernation, rather than doing something else?

In this essay I offer a psychological explanation for the groundhog phenomenon and its fun, testing it with the historical record as well as my own ethnographic field work at Beau's ceremony along with Cajun Ground Hog Day in Louisiana in the southern United States. Ecologic scientist Paul Shepard reminds us that members of *Homo sapiens* have spent far more of their genetic history living in close proximity to nonhuman natural beings, including natural beings considered sacred, than they have living settled lives that remain relatively isolated from the natural world. In this way humans are genetically predisposed to feel intimate, charged connections with the natural world. But because we have driven wild nature so far out of our lives, Shepard tells us, we persist alienated from ourselves and experience this alienation as a vague feeling that something remains amiss in our relationships with nature. Complementing this, social psychologist Peter Homans cogently argues that when cultures leave treasured remnants of their pasts behind as part of the process of historical evolution, they build monuments, broadly conceived, to those remnants to enable both conscious and unconscious mourning. **By yoking environmental science and social psychology**, in this essay I propose that the oracle of Groundhog Day serves as such a monument, as it helps humans mourn a Shepardian lost intimate experience of nature as sacred. However, the groundhog monument's mourning process is incomplete, as Bertram Cohler helps us to understand. First I will explore the theories of Shepard and Homans before delineating a historical trajectory of Groundhog Day and its meteorological animals. Finally I probe contemporary ethnographic Groundhog Day ceremonies to discover themes of cultural mourning.

### **Mourning the Loss of Sacred Nature**

Surrounded as we are with computers, mobile telephones, and high rise buildings, we often forget that anatomically modern humans, humans like you and I in body and intellect, have lived very differently through ninety-three percent of our history since our *species'* emergence around 150,000 BCE. Before the first appearance of domesticated animals and plants about 8,000 BCE, all humans were hunter/gatherers, living in tents, caves, and makeshift shelters (Mithen 2003). As anthropologist Brian Fagan (2010, 104-106) tells us in *Cro-Magnon*, early humans moved frequently so that they could follow the herds of wild animals whom they hunted, as animal flesh provided the overwhelming bulk of human food, especially during periods of greater glaciation. Because of this lifestyle, all members of a group intimately encountered animals in the act of tracking; killing, where one needed to be close enough to the animal that a thrust or thrown spear would penetrate; communal slaughtering; and using ubiquitous animal-based amenities from sewing needles to housing (159-161). Thus Palaeolithic humans survived by maintaining cozy connections with a variety of beings in the natural world through vivid direct interactions.

Paul Shepard, former professor of *environmental science* at Pitzer College and the Claremont Graduate School, pushes this timeline back to include evolution from human ancestors. Over time the brain of *Homo ergaster*, the proximate forerunner to *Homo sapiens* who appeared around 2 million years ago, expanded, this larger brain in turn enabling the development of hunting, during which intimate experiences with animals crucially shaped human nature. The need to hunt larger animals cooperatively encouraged symbolic capacities that led to cultural forms such as language and religion, while Palaeolithic cave art betrays human use of animals as mirrors (Shepard 1998, 64). Animals taught us how to hunt in the first place, helped us to reason abstractly, aided social cooperation, and incited greater memory capacities (31, 53-

54, 58), so that “the hunt made us human” (Shepard 1996, 9) in interdependence with animals. Along the way of this genomic and cultural development, we compared and contrasted ourselves with natural beings and especially animals such as the bear, who was “at the center of this transformation from natural history to cognitive history” (Shepard 1999, 8). Shepard (13) says, “Just as the natural world provides us with the means of physical health—good air and water, nutrition, and healing substances—plants and animals are sensible figures in the health of the mind....Thought is an ecological activity.”

Shepard has good anthropological company when he tells us that early religious forms were based less on sacrifices to hierarchically-superior invisible gods and more on good-neighbor peer-like “gifting” (Shepard 1999, 93) enacted within “an intricate cosmology in which epiphany and numinous presence are embodied and mediated by wild animals, plants, mountains, and springs” (Shepard 1998, 61). Animals, whom we regarded as “sentient, intelligent, and spiritual” (51), appeared as sacred gifts for humans while humans reciprocated with gifting of their own, such as through taboo-conditioned expressions of respect. This ecocentric approach enabled early humans to navigate the moral dilemma of animal killing by sanctifying the gift of the animal through ritualized hunting and spiritual identification with the animal (Shepard 1996, 27; 1999, 93). In this way humans lived not just close to nature, but close to nature in a sacred way, and Shepard says that this mental imprint remains with us genetically.

According to Shepard, we lost intimacy with wild nature with the advent of agriculture and lost sacredness in our ecological interactions with the arrival of Abrahamic religions. The few salient natural beings remaining in our lives today are secular and domesticated, and “the opposite of wild is not civilized but domesticated” (Shepard 1998, 145). Shepard (1999, 92-93) says, “What we lost with that wild, primal existence was a way of being for which the era of



agriculture and civilization lacks counterpoise. Human life is the poorer for it.” To our detriment we discarded a sane “humility toward the natural world,” thus creating a “misfit” in our genome-environment interactions (Shepard 1998, 62, 137). This makes us “psychotic” and “schizoid” (89, 122) in our relationships with nature, alienated from “our own otherness within,” and we are “less healthy in the domesticated environments than on those wild landscapes to which our DNA remains tuned” (133, 143). For example, we might show high regard for the domesticated animals in our lives without realizing that we are just narcissistically adoring our own creations (humans have substantially shaped all domesticated animals in their physical and mental evolutions), rather than admiring elements of the wild that we did not create. Thus we foolishly trick ourselves into giving ourselves domesticated “rough, inferior copies” (167) of the ecocentric connections with wild animals that we crave. Of pets, our “biological slaves,” Shepard says, “No one now doubts that pets can be therapeutic. But they are not a glorious bonus on life; rather they are compensations for something desperately missing, minimal replacements for friendship in all of its meanings” (Shepard 1996, 151).

Shepard tells us that we also have stripped nature of its sacredness in favor of hierarchical relationships with invisible deities, in so doing creating a “despiritualized natural world reduced to materials to be bargained” (Shepard 1998, 114). Therefore we experience a subtle, dysfunctional sense of loss, the forfeiture of intimate experiences with wild nature as sacred for which we are predisposed as part of our evolutionary heritage. We innately seek deeper ecocentric connections but do not find them: “Today’s urban gardeners and neo-subsistence people clearly long for genuine contact with the nonhuman world of nature, independence from the market, and the basic satisfaction of a livelihood gained by their own hands. But the side-effects of agriculture cursed the planter from the beginning” (93).

What do groups do when they experience such losses? According to the University of Chicago's Peter Homans, a specialist in the social psychology of mourning, in response to such losses humans create monuments, broadly conceived. To Homans monuments need not be hunks of stone and almost anything can be a monument, including myths, works of literature and art (Homans 2000, 25), teddy bears (Homans 1989, 278), and religious rituals (279). Its psychological **function**, not its physical form, defines a monument. A monument enacts social play (279) so that the mind, through unconscious fantasy processes, returns to the past to enjoy a transient reunion with what has been lost before being released back into the present to integrate the psychological time-travel experience (271). In this way, monuments, "the place in culture for the mind" (276), ideally facilitate for both individuals and groups the ability to mourn by leaving the past in the past in a healthy way while still productively appropriating history's lessons for the present (272-273). Homans says,

Traditionally, the monument has been the material structure around which both personal and collective mourning have taken place, and it has facilitated that mourning through a process of return and release. The monument "re-presents" a past event and serves as a carrier of memory back through time to that event. After the event has been recollected and reflected upon, memory is released, and one comes back, so to speak, to the present. Through this process, memory of an earlier experience of loss is assuaged and rendered, or rerendered, less stressful (Homans 2000, 22).

In this paper I argue that Groundhog Day oracles represent Homansian monuments for a Shephardian loss of the intimate experience of nonhuman nature as sacred. We may better perceive the role of the loss of sacred nature if we turn to a history of Groundhog Day.

### **Robotic Sacred Bears**

The history of Groundhog Day that I offer here is not definitive, it contains too many blurry historical and cultural boundaries, some of which appear impossible to clarify now, and

there are too few pages in this essay to examine them further. Thus my presentation is for suggestive illustration only, this being enough for my argument here.

The American naturalist John Jay Audubon used religious terms to describe hibernation as one of “the all-wise dispensations of the Creator” (Yoder 2003, 59) and numerous scholars tell us that humans have always been fascinated by the hibernation activity of animals like bears, as even today hibernation remains both mystery and target for medical research. Humans winter poorly, as we complain of the temperature while diminishing our food stores. Conversely, hibernating bears do not eat or make waste as they rest in dens self-chosen to be warm enough for a hibernator (Elfström, Swenson, and Ball 2008). Following this, respect for hibernation in Palaeolithic times was extended to a variety of animals, but with their human-like qualities bears remained exceptional (Hallowell 1926, 148-150).

At once both human and not in behavior and anatomy, and thus “an intermediary creature between the animal and human worlds” (Pastoureau 2011, 2), in the Palaeolithic era the bear “symbolized the harmony of society and nature” (Shepard and Sanders 1985, xi). In his classic study of ancient bear ceremonialism, anthropologist A. Irving Hallowell says that a variety of European Palaeolithic peoples exhibited “toward the bear an attitude which, in contrast to that manifested toward other creatures, is more or less unique in character....Some describe it as respect, others as reverence, veneration, or worship, but one and all are in agreement that, among the animals, bears are held in special esteem” (Hallowell 1926, 22). Because of this unique regard for the bear, American Groundhog Day on February 2 really could be called Bear Day, as it still is known among the Basques and in some places in Eastern Europe, since February 2 as a day highlights the religious roles of the bear through long stretches of European history, the American groundhog oracle only appearing later as a replacement. However, since hedgehogs

and badgers also participate in this complex, I will refer to February 2 as historical Animal Weather Oracle Day.

Bears are not true hibernators who sleep straight through the winter, as they give birth during their cold-weather retreats and may leave the den for short periods before returning to rest (Shepard and Sanders 1985, 10). Typically they appear from the den and finally remain awake right before spring's snow melt, making their behavior reasonably predictive of the changing of the seasons (57). This behavior, however, also makes them a target for humans, who in early spring may be in dire need of replenishing food and can follow bear footprints in the remaining snow (Hallowell 1926, 32). Thus for Palaeolithic peoples, the end of the bear's hibernation was doubly important, signaling as it did both the end of winter's cold and the first fresh food of spring.

Hallowell (1926) tells us that this hunting occurred in ritual fashion, reflecting the sacred nature of the bear and the need to atone for its killing, since "there were close spiritual and supernatural links between humans and their prey" (Fagan 2010, 223). In the prototypical forms of the complex Hallowell describes, hunters addressed the bear with respectful, sacred words; directed apologies to the bear for its demise; slaughtered and consumed the bear in ways surrounded by taboos; performed divinations arising from the bear's sacredness; and then disposed of the remains in a ritualized fashion. Hallowell informs us that the ethnological record indicates that such holy reverence and ritual activity directed toward bears may be old enough to have formed part of the first human religions.

Perhaps reflecting this, the sinkhole cave of Regourdou in France offers an example of an intentional burial of a Neanderthal man with a brown bear from 80,000 years ago, as historian Michel Pastoureau (2011, 11) describes in his book *The Bear: History of a Fallen King*. The

Chauvet cave in Ardèche contains vivid wall paintings of bears and the ritual placement of bear skulls by anatomically modern humans from around 31,000 BCE, long before the paintings at Lascaux or Altamira (13, 21-22). Moreover, the cave-corridor of Montespan from 15,000-20,000 years ago contains one of the oldest known **sculpture**, a **sculpture** of a bear that served a ritual function (24-25). Because much of Palaeolithic Europe during periods of glacial recession, and even the south and the Danube valley during the last glacial maximum (Mithen 2003, 160), possessed the temperate forests in which bears and bear ceremonialism thrive (Hallowell 1926, 154), it seems reasonable to think that bear ritualism formed an important part of European religion throughout the Upper Palaeolithic era, as Lydia Black (1998, 343), **as well as Germonpré and Hämäläinen (2007), assert**. However, this contested ethnological perspective needs more supporting archaeological data (**Armand 2010**).

Quite a few votive images from the Palaeolithic period appear to represent goddesses or bears and in Neolithic Europe from 6,500 BCE to 3,500 BCE we find an Animal Weather Oracle Day symbolic conjunction of goddess and bear begin, if it did not commence earlier, as anthropologist Marija Gimbutas describes. Gimbutas may have overstressed the centrality of a Neolithic European Great Goddess personage, but Neolithic veneration of goddess figures undoubtedly occurred, as numerous votive carvings, bits of pottery, and other artifacts teach us. These artifacts appear to reflect cultural traits shared by relative neighbors, traits that in themselves do not necessarily indicate a single, coherent culture. Therefore, as long as we remember that other religious forms, such as pre-Indo-European cattle veneration, bear veneration (Hodder 2006, 201), skull veneration, or worship of masculine procreative forces as found at places like Göbekli Tepe or Çatalhöyük (Mithen 2003, 65-67, 88-96), might have

coexisted with goddess veneration, Gimbutas makes a good guide regarding Neolithic goddesses and the bear.

Relying on an impressive set of archaeological data, Gimbutas (1991, 223) tells us that during the long transition from hunter/gatherer lifestyles to those of agriculturalists, holdover Palaeolithic religious conceptions and practices became oriented in Europe toward worship of a goddess figure who not only was symbolized by natural beings, she *was* the natural world, since for Neolithic Europeans “every aspect of the natural world is just as sacred as it is profane” (Mithen 2003, 161). This goddess was cyclical and processual, as she created life from herself and presided over not only birth but also death and rebirth in her ongoing transformations. As such, bears appeared to represent important manifestations of the goddess as expressed in symbolism dating at least to the seventh millennium BCE (Gimbutas 1991, 225). Because of the protectiveness of bear mothers, bears served as manifest mother goddesses who presided over childbirth, as Vinča culture bear-mother figurines (Gimbutas 1981, 190) and relic birthing rituals in Eastern Europe (Gimbutas 1991, 226) attest. Gimbutas (1999, 13) says, “The bear’s likeness often adorned mother/child representations, confirming her mystical maternal role,” reflecting an enduring theme of Animal Weather Oracle Day, the symbolic coincidence of bear and goddess.

Linguist Roslyn M. Frank helpfully probes holdovers of Neolithic bear veneration among the Basques, as the Basque/Pyrenees region significantly avoided the influence of later Indo-European cultures and still retains linguistic and cultural forms that predate the spread of Indo-European ideas. **In the Pyrenean region** February 2 is still celebrated as Bear Day. In parades in **Basque country** costumed dancers known as Mamozaurre or Joaldunak appear in **bear-like costumes** (Frank 2008, 43) and **in Pyrenean villages** mock ritual bear hunts, in which the bear dies but returns to life (like hibernation), are held. These parade appearances represent the

Weberian routinized charisma of former Bear Day “good luck visits,” in which small troupes would move from house to house in the company of a live bear or someone dressed as a bear (Frank 2001, 136). At each home, mock ritual bear hunts were staged, with trained bears feigning death and rebirth, seeking the goal of securing healing and protection from harm for the home (Frank 2008, 47-48, 61-62).

Epiphanies of the goddess appeared in other hibernating animals like hedgehogs, who served as manifest maternal goddesses (Gimbutas 1991, 244) because, like bear mothers, hedgehogs exhibit a special protectiveness, hedgehogs doing so through the prickly ball shapes that they assume in defense (Gimbutas 1981, 181). Also like bears, hedgehogs hibernate and therefore may be used as weather forecasters, as evidenced by their employment by Romans and their continued inspiration for German Igeltag celebrations, which mark the autumn start of the hibernation period. Badgers were part of this symbolic complex as well since, as Frank (2008, 56) tells us, they were known in several European pre-Indo-European languages as “little bears.” Especially in Germany they acted as end-of-winter oracles along with bears and February 2 still remains known in some locales as Dachstag, or Badger Day (Yoder 2003, 52).

Gimbutas’ Neolithic goddess materialized in several guises, including as the seasons. When she appeared as the warm months, the goddess assumed the form of a fertile maiden whose first emergence was announced by end-of-hibernation bears, with humans experiencing this manifestation of the goddess as spring and summer. However, in the cooler months, she arrived instead as what Gimbutas calls the Old Hag, “goddess of winter and darkness” (Gimbutas 1991, 305), who embodies cold weather and “controls the making of snow, the appearance of the sun, and the regeneration of nature” (243).

Indo-European religious notions that stressed the paramount status of male sky gods rather than the earthier religiosity of the earlier Neolithic entered Europe beginning around 4,500 BCE and provided a challenge to earlier religious forms (Anthony 2010). Gimbutas' powerful goddess figure seemed to transform, rather than disappear, in the wake of the uneven spread of Indo-European customs. For example, the previous apparent singular goddess with a dual nature (summer and winter, life and death) often split into two, such as the Greek pairing of Hekate and Artemis, this latter goddess having a name that derives from the word for "bear" and often taking bear form (Gimbutas 1981, 197). We can sense the continued strength of a goddess-oriented Bear Day, the day Persephone returns from the underworld (Rockwell 1991, 190), when we consider places such as Panagia Arkoudiotissa, "Mother of God of the Bear," in Crete. There in the cave of Acrotiri we find a large bear-shaped stalagmite and evidence of worship of proto-Artemis in bear form from Minoan times. On Bear Day of every year the cave still hosts its most important ritual of the year, although now it is Christianized and oriented toward Candlemas rites concerning the purification of Mary (Gimbutas 1991, 226). In this way the ancient conjoint religious reverence for sacred mother and bear continues, with the bear goddess of old transformed on Bear Day in a **bear-themed** cave into the mother of Jesus.

Indo-European religious forms left a strong impression on the Celts who thrived over an expanse of western and central Europe, including regions where Gimbutas found her Neolithic goddesses, throughout the first millennium BCE. But compared to Indo-Europeanized others such as Greeks and Romans, the Celts maintained a greater vitality of some earlier nature religious forms, including bear beliefs, as "the bear occupied a symbolic position of first rank among the ancient Celts" (Pastoureau 2011, 51). The Celts retained bear veneration, bear weather forecasting, and the coincidence of goddess and bear in their great bear goddess Artio,



also known as Arduina, namesake of the Ardennes. Evidence of the worship of Artio extends from northern Germany to Bern, a city named for the bear, and to Spain (Gimbutas 1999, 183).

Among the Celts, the Old European wintertime Old Hag goddess that Gimbutas described perhaps became Cailleach, who is also known as Cailleach Bheur, Caillagh Ny Groamagh, and other names (Mackillop 1998, 62-63; Monaghan 2004, 68). As a Celtic story goes, on February 1, the holiday of Imbolc, Cailleach seeks more firewood for winter. If the day is fair, she feels free to store up fuel. But if the weather is poor, she stays in and does not gather much firewood. Since Cailleach controls winter, this latter contingency means that she must end winter early due to a lack of heating fuel (Monaghan 2004, 69, 256). This myth seems to remain alive in the contemporary groundhog's seemingly counter-intuitive prediction, where fine Groundhog Day weather and hence a groundhog shadow means bad weather ahead, whereas inclement Groundhog Day weather results in no groundhog shadow and hence future good weather. As we see, the groundhog's shadow-based prediction parallels the firewood preferences of Cailleach. The story of Cailleach also helps us to appreciate that Celtic Animal Weather Oracle Day fell on February 1, coinciding with the holiday that revered forms of the animal-loving goddess Brigit.

Animal Weather Oracle Day changed date to February 2 (February 15 for Eastern churches on the Julian calendar) with the Christianization of Europe, thus standardizing the date for Christianized Celtic, Basque, and other cultural celebrations across much of the continent. Luke 2:22-38 describes the presentation of Jesus in the temple of Jerusalem and the purification of Mary falling forty days after Jesus' birth. Setting Christmas in the West to December 25 in the fourth century meant that this purification of Mary, celebrated as the holy day of Candlemas, occurred on February 2. This date was convenient for the early church, which liked to fight

pagan holidays by juxtaposing Christian celebrations. As a result, Celtic Imbolc on February 1 virtually disappeared, as **the** traditions that remained, such as Brigit's Night, became absorbed into February 2 Candlemas (Hutton 1997, 134-139). The practice of Animal Weather Oracle Day end-of-winter prognostication remained, however, as we see in a Scottish rhyme:

If Candlemass day be dry and fair,  
The half 'o winter's to come and mair;  
If Candlemass day be wet and foul,  
The half 'o winter's gane at Yule. (Yoder 2003, 52)

This shift resulted in the demise of the bear on Animal Weather Oracle Day. As part of its wars against all forms of nature worship, Christianity took especial aim at the still-lively religious regard for bears in Europe. Pastoureau (2011, 89) says,

The Church saw the bear as the most dangerous of all indigenous animals and even as a creature of the Devil. This was not because it was endowed with such prodigious strength that no other animal could defeat it but primarily because it strangely resembled man [*sic*], so much so that human conduct was attributed to it. It was also the animal around which clustered oral traditions, uncontrollable beliefs, and the superstitions that were the most difficult to eradicate.

Christianity could have embraced the bear's hibernation as a dynamic symbol of the death and resurrection of Jesus but, because of the bear's hearty veneration in non-Christian worlds, chose to demonize the bear instead. The church intentionally suppressed bear reverence and successfully replaced the bear with the foreign lion as the "king of the beasts" (89). For instance, Charlemagne led bear slaughters in Germany in which "thousands of bears were massacred. The beast that was too much venerated by the Germans seemed to be an enemy of Christ" (90-91). Bear veneration became subsumed and transformed under the worship of St. Martin and St. Blaise, with Martin's feast day of November 11 coinciding with some ancient non-Christian rituals celebrating the beginning of the bear's hibernation on that day (Frank 2009, 90-93; Pastoureau 2011, 105-106). The virtual extinction of the brown bear from Britain by

around 1000 CE, and not long after across Western Europe outside of montane areas (Shepard and Sanders 1985, 201), sealed this process. Of this, Paul Shepard (1999, 96) groaned, “The end of the bear as a physical presence coincides with the end of a human way of being at peace on the earth.” From this point on, the primary oracles of Animal Weather Oracle Day would be badgers and hedgehogs, as they escaped the church’s ire while enjoying their own symbolic weather connections, as we have seen. However, Animal Weather Oracle Day weather forecasts by bears still exist in Silesia, Hungary, and Carinthia (Shepard and Sanders 1985, 137).

Christianization signaled another major change to Animal Weather Oracle Day, secularization. With its fundamental aversion to nature religion in the name of worshipping a transcendent, invisible deity, Christianity stripped Animal Weather Oracle Day of human sacred connections to nature. The spiritual regard with which Europeans may have beheld animals, in one way or another, since the Palaeolithic evaporated in the face of calls for Biblical stewardship and human supremacy. Candlemas animal weather forecasting continued in formerly Celtic areas but as secularized folk events that were severed from their roots in dramatic animal veneration. Animal charisma calcified into farmer’s almanac fodder. Shepard (1996, 328) writes that, “The loss of numen or spirit in animals the great modern defeat,” and here the downfall appeared to include bears, hedgehogs, and badgers.

Thus when Pennsylvania Dutch (really, Pennsylvania *Deutsch*) settlers arrived from southwestern Germany with their Imbolc/Candlemas hedgehog and badger weather oracle folk traditions, these traditions were long shorn of their roots in the religious world, so that even the Old Order Amish, who otherwise reject the wider Pennsylvania Dutch traditions of the Christmas tree and Easter rabbit, nonetheless retained animal weather oracles, which still were rejected by Quakers (Yoder 2003, 33, 124). February 2, Animal Weather Oracle Day, thus reflects a

Shepardian trajectory. Once it was a day celebrating holy, interconnected relationships with animals like bears, hedgehogs, and badgers, and remained like this, in some way, for many centuries. Now both interconnected experiences of and sacred regard for animals largely have been lost in the West.

The loss of religious grounding means that a freer atmosphere in terms of choice of weather animal has prevailed in North America. Interestingly, due to historical amnesia at least, bears do not figure prominently as an animal choice despite their presence in colonial Pennsylvania. Although badgers exist in western Pennsylvania, groundhogs remain more plentiful, so the German heritage of badger oracles appears to transfer to groundhogs. Wisconsin's Jimmy the Groundhog imitates this animal choice despite the self-chosen description of his state as "the Badger State," provocatively showing how the end-of-winter animal oracle practice has become separated from its German sacred animal roots. Other oracular options are more imaginative. There were Mr. Prozac and his successor Tutor, llamas in Michigan who, as the story goes, learned meteorology from a groundhog friend named Noah before he died. Flatiron Freddie in Boulder, Colorado, is a dead, taxidermed yellow-bellied marmot who delivers his predictions through mechanical human control, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals recommends that such robotic groundhogs be used. Balzac Billy near Calgary, Alberta, is a human in a groundhog suit, as is the groundhog at the University of Dallas celebration, reflecting just how much has changed since the days of vibrant sacred regard for slope-headed cave bears. Pierre C. Shadeaux, a nutria, also exemplifies this principle, and it is to Pierre that I now turn.

### **Southern Soothsayers**

New Iberia, a small town in southern Louisiana, rests a stone's throw from the marshes along the coast of the Gulf of Mexico. Because of its semi-tropical climate, New Iberia hosts palm trees, southern longleaf pines, and some innovative twists on February 2, which the town has celebrated as Cajun Ground Hog Day since 1998. In 2015, Cajun Ground Hog Day fell in the midst of the annual weeks-long locally-treasured Mardi Gras holiday, so the town was decorated with Mardi Gras banners and the organizers of the celebration all wore tall stove-pipe hats in yellow, green, and purple Mardi Gras colors, distinguishing them from the black top hats and tails in Punxsutawney. In this way, just as Punxsutawney evokes its local Pennsylvania Dutch cultural heritage on February 2, so New Iberia celebrates its Cajun French cultural heritage. The humans in attendance also proudly claim Cajun status for the ceremony's oracular animal, who bears the Cajun-inspired name Pierre C. Shadeaux.

Pierre is a nutria, not a groundhog. Nutrias (*Myocastor coypus*) are wetlands-dwelling semi-aquatic rodents originally brought to Louisiana from Patagonia in the 1930's by fur ranchers (Nolfo-Clements 2009, 399), as their coats are quite soft. Some of these nutrias escaped captivity and now thrive wild in the bayous near New Iberia. Nutrias resemble beavers in some ways but have the round tail of a rat rather than a flat tail. Since the groundhog's range does not extend to southern Louisiana and nutrias represent locally emblematic larger rodents, incarnations of Pierre have arisen to become meteorological oracles. Typically organizers capture a couple of wild nutrias a few weeks before February 2 and pamper them in the office of a local veterinarian before the one with the mildest behavior becomes chosen for the big day, although a pet nutria also has appeared as Pierre.

Unlike groundhogs, nutrias do not truly hibernate, although like badgers they slow in the winter. This is no problem because Pierre predicts the length of summer, not winter, making his

prediction method different than other “groundhogs.” In New Iberia, moderate winters are always short but summer can be brutally hot and humid while containing devastating hurricanes, so “no shadow” indicates the ideal oracular outcome of a short, mild summer.

The ceremony takes place in the middle of the town in a park surrounded by trees. These trees cast shadows over the ceremonial area at the time of the ritual at 7:30 AM, making it difficult for Pierre to see his shadow even though it is a sunny day. About one hundred people surround a microphone for human speeches as well as a platform for Pierre. This platform is raised about a meter above the ground and provides Pierre a “courtyard” of about sixty square feet (7 square meters) that is surrounded by a protective chicken wire fence. At the center of his courtyard rests his house, a small-scale one-story rustic Cajun home which is nice yet a far cry from the relatively opulent mansion of General Beauregard Lee. To be fair, Beau’s residence is permanent while Pierre’s is purely ceremonial. Further, although Pierre receives warm words, affection, and cheers, he lacks the very noisy fans that superstar Beau attracts and his ceremony overall remains a quieter affair.

The ritual commences with a speech from Will Chapman, publisher of *The Daily Iberian* newspaper who, like newspaperman Clymer H. Freas in Punxsutawney, created the ceremony and its necessary publicity. Having done his job well, this year Chapman has attracted a team filming the ceremony for an episode of a BBC television show. The show features a purported brother and sister team who serve as honorary Grand Marshalls for Pierre’s celebration this year. Speaking to the crowd, Chapman begins the ceremony by introducing Cajun Ground Hog Day with the claim that “it helps us to honor nature,” in so doing opening a fantasy space for a reverent experience of nature from a Homansian point of view. He then introduces the leader of the Downtown Business Association, who implores everyone in attendance to “shop locally,”

highlighting the role of Groundhog Day as a tourist dollar magnet. The mayor reads a proclamation of February 2 as Cajun Ground Hog Day and another town leader recites a poem that he wrote for the occasion. Interestingly, a local Episcopalian preacher then offers this prayer:

Oh loving God, the only source of life, in the beginning your breath and spirit went forth into the world, until the earth was filled with your creatures. By your mercy you recreate both the earth and our hearts after every winter season and so we praise you for continually transforming us, to reflect the first splendid day of creation. Because you love all creatures and the stirring of new life, humanity has always encountered you in nature. Whales that play in the ocean sing your praise. The gentle dove is your messenger. And the animals who share our homes are your ministers. Today we especially honor Pierre C. Shadeaux as one of your prophets. May he see no shadow of his image today, that we may be spared an early summer of unbearable heat and humidity. And while we are gathered together and praying, may we ask one more favor? That the great state of Louisiana be spared from hurricanes or other destructive acts of nature. With all that is mute, and all that has voice, we praise you for the morning and all of your care. Amen.

This prayer, reminiscent of Job 12:7-10, helps us to understand the groundhog phenomenon in several ways. First, it calls our attention to the natural world and its possible sacredness since the Christian God is “encountered...in nature” and pets are “ministers,” opening an unconscious fantasy space for experientially entertaining the notion of animals as wise and sacred, a psychological return to a more primal era when animals represented awesome spiritual presences. The preacher even describes Pierre as a “prophet.” However, this description, if taken seriously, represents Christian heresy in terms of attributing religious leadership to animals, thus highlighting a limitation of the fantasy process. Pierre’s “prophethood” actually was a tongue-in-cheek joke and was taken that way by participants, with no real abrogation of Christian doctrine intended. Indeed, unlike some other animal oracles, Pierre does not predict weather if February 2 is a Sunday in deference to his religious context deep within the Christian Bible Belt. Thus we see in the prayer an opening for a make-believe fantasy space regarding sacred and wise animals as well as religious obstacles to the real world integration of that fantasy material.

Pierre's oracular ritual foregrounds further elements relevant to a Shepardian/Homansian understanding. After the speeches and the prayer, attention shifts to Pierre's house, with an atmosphere of expectation of meeting an animal sage already heightened. Young and old alike eagerly crane their necks to be sure to see Pierre in action. Even well-educated adults who otherwise remain skeptical of nutria oracles momentarily seem to suspend their intellectual disbelief while pious Bible Belt Christians, usually not given to experiences of nature veneration, appear to suspend religious disbelief and mercurially regard Pierre at least as special, if not downright sacred, in an extra-Christian way. **Perhaps this latter effect is not unlike the inchoate religiosity hovering within the overt secularism of the sport of American football as described by Bain-Selbo (2012).**

With people crowding around, attendants at the rear of Pierre's house gently encourage Pierre to emerge through his front door, which he eventually does. The unconscious fantasy make-believe space of the sacred and wise animal now as rich as it can be among the participants, the crowd erupts in a roar when Pierre emerges from his front door and then audibly sighs when he immediately turns to re-enter his house, as if Pierre's appearance is, for a moment at least, the only thing in the world that matters. Once again prompted through the front door and greeted with cheers, Pierre then wanders around his courtyard for about two minutes, pausing at times to look around. Humans attentively watch his every move during this time, looking to discern elements of prophesy in action. People vocally offer their affection toward and support of Pierre as if their encouragement alters outcomes for Pierre or his prediction. Thus Pierre the animal sage simultaneously, if temporarily, mediates the psychological boundaries between present and past, human and nonhuman nature, and the human and the extra-institutional sacred, all within a charged, make-believe psychic space available to adults and children alike. The same



may be said during the ceremony for Beau the groundhog, whom I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, and other February 2 live animal oracles.

The Grand Marshalls then offer their translation of Pierre's experience as "no shadow," meaning that summer will be milder. At this news the crowd, still joyfully entertaining a playful mental state of unconscious neo-animist reverie, explodes in shouts of joy. But, after the hooting and backslapping subsides, the ritual rather abruptly ends. Some participants linger and caress Pierre, as this represents a designed part of the program to help participants contact nature. In an interview Chapman said, "Most people have not seen nutrias up close like they can see Pierre, so that is an experience, especially for kids, where people get in touch with nature." However, Pierre's admirers are admonished to "watch his teeth," Pierre having been returned from sacred sage to marsh creature with the ritual's end. Thus the element of the mourning process that involves a release back into the present was little ritualized and participants mostly were left on their own to integrate (or not) the quite temporary experience. Perhaps this is why participants described the ritual using terms like "enjoyable" and "interesting" but not "transformative." This transience and lack of support for release back into the present draws our attention to the overall outcomes of this process of mourning the loss of sacred nature.

## **Conclusion**

As I have described, our albeit incomplete history of Groundhog Day reads like a Shepardian lament in which once intimate, ecocentric, and sacred relationships with natural beings decay into modern anthropocentric and secular forms, leaving us, as Shepard says, alienated from nature as well as our own genome (Shepard 1992). But once a year humans gather to engage in a Homansian mourning ritual of unconscious time travel to an age of greater sacred

friendship with nature, if only fleetingly experienced, before returning to their twenty-first century lives. In this, the oracular animal of civil nature religion mediates present and past, human and nonhuman, and the human and the extra-institutional sacred. I speculatively suggest that humans who follow the groundhog through the news rather than in-person at ceremonies still may experience abbreviated versions of this process as long as they suspend some measure of disbelief or are among the slim minority of the population who trust groundhog oracles.

This reading of Groundhog Day comes to us from joining environmental science with social psychology, highlighting the positive research roles that these scientific disciplines may play when merged in order to study of religion. Likewise, in *The Significance of Monuments* archaeologist Richard Bradley argues that changing Neolithic European notions of monuments, burial or otherwise, facilitated the psychological transformations required to shift from hunter/gatherer to farmer. Bradley states that burial practices over time evolved from multi-burial barrows to passage tombs like Newgrange, these latter afterwards providing architectural inspiration for the many henges, such as Stonehenge, found throughout Western Europe. In this way, Bradley says, religious monuments aided the spread of agriculture by altering cultural perceptions of time and place (163). In contradistinction, the groundhog-as-monument, however fun, appears not to initiate any real social change. The holy animal persons we mourn disappeared from our lives so very long ago that none of us really know what we could be missing, making a return to ancient relationship with them necessarily ill-defined. Thus the groundhog monument simply cannot incite the experience of the awesome sacred charisma of Palaeolithic critters, making its ritual less effervescent, in Durkheim's (2008) sense, than it could be. After all, attendees regard the affair as secular and any neo-animist sensibility arises unconsciously. There also exists an uneasy fit between the existing effervescence and the

strongly anthropocentric flavors of the dominant relationships with nature in the contemporary United States (Noske 1997), perhaps resulting in the weak ritual support for the release back to the present leg of the mourning process. Even if one vividly time travels unconsciously in a Homansian way, there exists little present cultural support for meaningfully integrating ecocentric experiences into twenty-first century Western realities. Thus human lives, and relationships with nature, return undisturbed on February 3, the group having integrated little from the ritual mourning process of return to the past and then release to the present.

But of course this impotent mourning coexists with the exuberant fun of the groundhog ritual and psychologist Bertram Cohler's theory of nostalgia can help to explain how. Cohler (2008, 208-209) studied survivors' experiences of the Holocaust to explore themes of historical loss in gloomy experiences of "melancholia." In so doing, he found that the social experience of nostalgia, while non-transformative in itself, can offer a temporary tonic for historical melancholia, as it provides a short-term, upbeat encounter of the past in the present. When applied to groundhogs, Cohler might find this nostalgia expressed as the hallmark playfulness of February 2, when animals once again become holy sages.

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