THE WAYFINDERS:  
“SEASON OF THE BROWN HYENA” (1-34)  

LINA MEDAGLIA-MILLER  
JANUARY 2012
Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
We live in an ethnosphere, the sum total of thoughts, intuitions, myths and beliefs, ideas and inspirations brought about by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness.

Languages carry culture, yet 50% of the world’s still-present languages are not being taught to children. From 7,000 living languages, 3,500 will disappear within this generation.

(Davis, pp. 1-3)
Globalization and Linguistic Diversity

- Q: “Would the world be a better place if we all spoke the same language?”
- A: “Ok, but what universal language?”
- Haida or Yoruba, or Lakota or Inuktitut, or San.
- That’s when people get it—how would you like never being able to speak your language again?
- Over 600 languages have fewer than 100 speakers.
- 80% of humans communicate with just 83 languages.

(Davis, pp. 3-4)

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
“When you lose a language, you lose culture, intellectual wealth, a work of art.” -- MIT linguist Ken Hale

Globalization - the true equalizer, suggesting that the world can be in your hand; that you never have to leave your house, your city, your continent again.

We are fusing our visions into a single reality—the world appears monochromatic if you see it through one cultural paradigm—your own.

(Davis, p.6)
Culture and DNA

- Our history is not just encoded in cultural symbology or languages, it is also encoded in our DNA.
- We are the result of over a billion years of evolutionary transformation.
- We all have a double helix of 4 molecules: A, C, G, T—six billion bits of data encoded into our existence.
- Our 46 chromosomes are bundled and re-shuffled in a unique combination each time a child is born.
- DNA passes more or less intact through generations—from mother to daughter and father to son.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Almost all DNA—99.9% of the three billion nucleotides, does not vary from person to person.

During billions of replications, minute mutations occur that don’t alter people significantly, but can be traced back to genetic pools, to cultural origins, to genetic relationships among cultural groups.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Genetics and history (2)

- An individual’s descendants can be traced back to him/her via these genetic mutations—like an historical marker.

- Overwhelming scientific consensus is that we all came from Africa about 60,000 years ago—driven out by geologic conditions, curiosity, search for water and food.

(Davis, pp. 7-9)

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Ancestral migrations

- First wave of migration followed the shoreline of Asia... to reach Australia by as early as 50,000 BP (before present).
- Second wave moved north through the middle east, then turned east, dividing once again 40,000 years ago, sending movements south to India, west and south through southeast Asia to southern China and north into Central Asia.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Ancestral migrations (2)

- From here, two other migrations brought people west to Europe (30,000 BP) and east to Siberia (populated by 20,000 BP).
- 12,000, a new wave came out of the Middle East into southeastern Europe, people moved north to China. Hunters crossed the land bridge of Beringia to the Americas.
- Within 2,000 years, their descendants had reached Tierra Del Fuego.
- The whole journey lasted 2,500 generations.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Anthropology started as an attempt to “decipher the exotic other,” with the hope that by understanding others, we could appreciate our own humanity better.

But, as with any other discipline, it can be (and was) hijacked by those who served power, servants of the Crown dispatched by kingdoms far away to control and exploit tribal peoples and their cultures.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Evolutionary Theory

- **Evolutionary theory** (a thorn in the side of progressive scientists), distilled from the study of animal minutiae (e.g. bird beaks, beetles and barnacles), slipped into social theory in a manner convenient to the age and to the powerful of that age.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
“Survival of the fittest” (1866) was a phrase coined by Herbert Spencer, an economist. This underlined a way of thinking that gave scientific voice to racist/classist/sexist theories.

Evolution suggested change through time, and this gave way to a “laddering theory” and the racist practices of “civilizing” and “Christianizing” the natives (dragging them away from their own “primitive” cultures to serve the rich and learn by example).

(Davis, pp. 11-12)
Cultures of the world came to be seen as “living museums” where Victorian logic dictated that advanced societies had an obligation to “help” the backward.

Diamond magnate Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) said:”We are the best people in the world, and the more of the world we inhabit, the better it is for humanity.”

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Racism becomes encoded in science, and in political institutions. The “pseudosciences” of phrenology and other mismeasurements, where minute details about people’s physicality were tabulated, obsessed over as somehow significant in detecting instances of inferiority when compared to Europeans—comparing body parts: skulls, hips, thighs, hair, skin colour—phrenology, the study of the skull (size).

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Linnaeus: racialization

- **Linnaeus**, the father of classification, determined that while all humans belonged to the species “Homo Sapiens” (man the wise), some sub-species were closer to this ideal than others.

- He distinguished 5 subspecies, which he identified as Afer (African), Americanus (Native American), Asiaticus (Asian), Europaeus (European), and a final catch-all, Monstrosus, which includes everyone else.

- This last category was felt to be so bizarre to the European eye that it defies classification.

Wade Davis, *The Wayfinders*, chapter one
Darwin misread

- Darwin was misread; Linnaeus’ classifications accepted.
- Thomas Whiffen’s worldview of Amazon and its people: “cruel land, bestial people.” His advice to future expeditions, was to carry guns. Whiffen and others also described genitals and breasts in detail, subscribing to what Michael Taussig described as “the penis school of physical anthropology.”

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Eugenics

- Others not interested in measurements were interested, nevertheless, in improving ‘the stock.’ At the turn of the century the movement called eugenics (good birth) came about.

- By the 1920’s, this idea of eugenics had been used as a rationale for selective breeding and culling. The goal became to eliminate undesirable elements from the genetic pool.

- The Nazis used eugenics as justification for genocide and human experimentation.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
The **Diaspora** and founded fears

- No wonder people are afraid of a sweeping theory of a **Diaspora**—Native people have already been pushed out of their ancestral lands and have had everything stolen from them.
- Why would they want to hear a story that their people came from somewhere else too?
- Davis says: “...fears are unfounded. History suggests that dominant groups don’t need excuses to ravage the weak.”
- Both Nazis and Marxist-Leninists ravaged the weak.

(Davis, p.15)

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
“Science is only one way of knowing, and its purpose is not to generate absolute truths but rather to inspire better and better ways of thinking about phenomena.”

Yet, in 1965, American anthropologist, president of AAoPA, full prof at Penn U., Carleton Coon wrote two books: The Origin of Races, and The Living Races of Man, in which he advanced the theory that there are 5 human subspecies. He suggested that the reason why Europeans were technologically advanced was because of their natural superiority.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
The Fallacy of Race

- Science suggests beyond a reasonable doubt that race is fiction. There are no sharp genetic differences among populations, anywhere in the world. The most remote society on earth contains 85% of our total genetic diversity—all cultures contain the same mental acuity and the same capacity for genius.
- “We share a sacred endowment, a common history written within our bones.”

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
The Origins of our parents

- When asked the question: What does it mean to be human and alive? The cultures of the world would respond in 7,000 different voices, although we are all cut out of “the same genetic cloth.” (Davis, p. 18)

- We can track the journey of the original people by working backwards (Davis, p. 19).

- Who were these people who walked out of Africa 60,000 or more years ago? To find them, it would be necessary to find a group of people who lack all of the genetic mutations that occurred among the successive waves that spread our ancestors throughout the world.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Our parents: The San

- They are the San, bushmen who survived (and still survive) some of the hardest weather/geological conditions known to humans.

- They are spread out over the Kalahari desert, 55,000 people across 84,000 square kilometers—in Botswana, Namibia, and Southern Angola.

- They are considered the descendants of the “first people” who inhabited the entire African subcontinent and much of east Africa.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Their language is totally unrelated to any other known family of languages. They use cadences and clicks and 141 sounds; we use 31 in everyday English. They are the tree trunk; we (the rest of the world) are the branches.

In the 20th Century, much of what happened to many other “First Nations” people happened to them—the impact of alcohol and “formal education,” and the false promises of development shattered many of their lives.

Before that, and for about 10,000, the San followed natural rhythms—adapted to a very tough environment; a triumph of ingenuity, will, and spirit.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
How did the San adapt? (1)

- (a) They anticipate every nuance of every season, every day, every animal.

- (b) There is a serious scarcity of water for most of the year, so they look to the hollows of trees, search beneath the mud with hollow reeds, catch it in ostrich eggs, and squeeze it from roots and from the guts of animals.

- (c) They move constantly, from May to December, and dig deep for water—20 large tubers a day to keep each person alive and replenished from the loss of 3 litres a day of sweat.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
How did the San adapt? (2)

- (d) In the worst season (The Season of the Brown Hyena), they scrape hollows in the ground, moisten the ground with urine, and bury themselves underneath, lying still, tolerating the flies and the heat until the sun goes down.

- (e) In January, the rains arrive and if all goes well, they last for 3 months, and the water can be saved for later. But rains are not constant or dependable—dying of thirst is the San’s constant threat. (Davis, p. 22)

- (f) Wanderings of the San are not random; each step is into known territory and honours stories, traditions, and ancient system of ownership--each band owns a particular resource (i.e. a tree, a shrub, a source of honey).

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
How did the San adapt? (3)

- (g) Favourite time is April, the Season of the Hunter. Excellent hunters—very meticulous and keen observers. Boys’ rites of passage into manhood is connected to the hunt. (Davis, p. 23-24)

- (h) Arrows, bone-tipped, poisoned with beetle larvae are given as gifts from one man to another and the resultant social obligation is part of bonding an individual to entire culture—to refuse a gift is an act of hostility.

- (i) Fire, the hearth, represents life, and the unity of the people as many rituals include fire/light.

- (j) Systems of spirituality well-developed through ritualistic dance/trance, paying respect to gods

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
San’s indomitable spirit

“language, stealth, spirit, adaptive genius—this is what allowed the San to survive the Kalahari.”

Questions remain:
- What made them reach out and find every habitable place on the planet?
- What did they know?
- How did they think?
- What inspired them, besides wanting to live?

(Davis, p. 26)

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Cave Art (1)

- “The place to witness the primordial flash of the spirit…” is beneath the ground in southwest France (Lascaux) and beyond the Pyrenees in Spain (Altamira)—stunning Upper Paleolithic cave art, created by our direct ancestors was already thousands of years old by the time the Neanderthal humanoids had almost entirely disappeared, 27,000 years ago.

- Some folks challenge this and claim that we are a combination of Homo Sapiens and Neanderthals.
Cave art (2)

- This art shows astonishing beauty, art, technology, ingenuity, aesthetics. Observers (artists, scientists, social historians, ordinary people) are perplexed by what they see, and have tried to make sense of why images float in isolation, why there are no background or ground lines, why there are very few depictions of people, and no displays of fighting/hunting/conflict.

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
Cave art (3)

- Northrop Frye, as he struggled to describe what he saw, said: We can add such words as religion or magic, but the fact remains that...the motivation is something we cannot understand [or] recapture.”

- Clayton Eshleman suggested that this art represents the moment when humans emerged from their animal nature, acquired self-consciousness, and separated themselves from the animal realm.

(Davis, P. 30)

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
“Cave art also marked the beginning of our discontent, the restless quest for meaning and understanding that has propelled the human dream ever since…

Our entire existential experience over the past 50,000 years may be distilled into: HOW and WHY…These are the departure points of all inquiry, the slivers of insight around which cultures have crystallized.”

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one
“Given the common challenges, the diversity of cultural adaptation has been astonishing…and yet the word “culture” can never be precisely defined,” as it is the sum total of historic and geographic adaptation, imagination, and visions of a group of people. (Davis, p. 32)

“The full measure of a culture embraces both the actions of a people and the quality of their aspirations, the nature of the metaphors that propel their lives.” (Davis, p. 33)

Wade Davis, The Wayfinders, chapter one