



PROPHETIC STORY-WEAVING AND TRUTH-TELLING

On the Road to Servant-Leadership in Smoke Signals

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*When the sins of our fathers visit us, we do not have to play host.
We can banish them with forgiveness. As God, in his Largeness
and His Laws —August Wilson*

North Dakota

At my grandfather's 95th birthday party, I visit his table.
Spread out in front of him are photographs from his childhood.
Each shot taken from far away, as if faces weren't important
on the North Dakota plains, ancient family members
dotting the flat landscape like tiny shrubs.

I point to a picture with no people, only tents on the grass.
He explains that the local tribe would set up camp
on his family's land and trade in town. He found it exciting,
but he worried about their horses because they were hobbled.
Even after his father explained why, he remained
uneasy. I thought they might trip over their own legs
and get hurt, he says. I wanted to untie them.

Later my dad tells me that he'd never seen that picture,
never knew about the tribe and the tents. And I wonder
if it might have cushioned what was hard between them—



the cowering under the kitchen table if dishes weren't done,
the fist to the face after a broken curfew—if just once
my dad had heard the story of the hobbled horses,
animals conditioned to accept pressure and restrictions,
and how a long time ago
his father had wanted
to free them.
(Davis, 2018, p. 18)

Ever since I watched the film *Smoke Signals* (Eyre, 1998), I have been struck by the depth with which its exploration of intergenerational trauma and forgiveness moves me and resonates with me. The above poem illustrates why I am so drawn to its theme of reconciliation between father and sons. My grandfather is now ninety-nine, in good health, and living in an assisted living home in California. Unlike Victor, the film's protagonist who must wrestle with the emotional legacy of his dead father's abandonment and abuse, my father has had a lifetime to negotiate his relationship with his father and reconcile with the dysfunctional example of masculinity he grew up with. He not only avoided repeating his father's violent patterns, but he committed himself to a life of nonviolence and has been a loving, gentle presence in the lives of his children and grandchildren. As for my grandfather, he learned to say the words *I love you* to his children and grandchildren forty years ago, and for the last eleven years since my grandmother died, has faithfully remembered to send us all birthday cards with kind, handwritten notes in them. I know, however, that his anger lurks below the surface, and he does not acknowledge that his parenting was problematic. For that reason, my father has found that the best way to have a loving and respectful relationship with him is, for the most part, from a distance.



Parker Palmer (2000) wrote that if we are to become whole, we must embrace our shadows and our light. I am grateful to my father for speaking honestly with me about the shadows in his relationship with my grandfather, while at the same time, teaching me to see the light in him. The man who punched my father in the face for violating his curfew is the same man who would read Shelley and Keats before I came to visit so that he could talk about his love of language with me, his English major granddaughter. My father has been a true servant-leader to his children and grandchildren. I am grateful to the prophetic voices and servant-leaders in his life, my mother among them, who helped him to grapple in a healthy way with his father's legacy so that he could embrace a more life-giving vision of masculinity and fatherhood. It is with that gratitude that I approach my analysis of Thomas's servant-leadership role in Victor's journey to forgive his father in the film *Smoke Signals*.

SHADOW, LIGHT, AND THE CRACKS IN THE LENS

At the same time, I am mindful of the shadow of sexual harassment allegations against screenwriter Sherman Alexie that were brought into the light two years ago (Neary, 2018), and I acknowledge that my analysis of Thomas as a servant-leader who helps Victor embrace a more healthy vision of masculinity coexists with that shadow. bell hooks (2004) defined patriarchy as "the single most life-threatening social disease assaulting the male body and spirit in our nation" (Understanding Patriarchy) and pointed to feminist thinking and practice as the only way that threat can be addressed. She insisted that men must let go of the will to dominate in order for patriarchy to be dismantled, and called for an understanding that all of us have been socialized to accept sexist thought and action (hooks, 2004) because patriarchy is systemic (Remnick, 2017).



hooks (2015) pointed to cultural criticism as an important arena “for the exchange of knowledge, or the formation of new [feminist] epistemologies” (Introduction). In particular, she found film criticism to be a place in which the personal meets the academic, valuable not because it allows us an escape from the oppression of patriarchy, but because it creates a space “of confrontation and collectivity” (Humm, 1997, p. 34). The critical lens with which she approaches cultural and film criticism is one that is unflinchingly committed to ending sexist oppression and to creating context for constructive conflict (hooks, 2015). It is through this lens that she recognized both the sexism of Paulo Freire’s language and the liberatory power of his work (hooks, 2014); and the patriarchal nature of Tich Nhat Hanh’s views on marriage and family and the wisdom of his teachings on work and other social issues (Tworkov, 1992). It is also through this lens that she took issue with Spike Lee’s cinematic portrayal of black masculinity and femininity while also praising the political art of his films (Humm, 1997). hooks (2015) saw cultural criticism in general and film criticism in particular as a space for liberatory discussion informed by a love ethic.

The #MeToo movement confronts us on both an individual and collective level with the question of how to approach the artistic work of men who have acted out of the patriarchal will to dominate and hurt women. Critics have noted that Alexie’s status as the best-known Native American writer, his power within the publishing industry (Keeler, 2018), and his ability to write so movingly about racial injustice (Laban, 2018) make it particularly painful to grapple with his behavior. Yin (2018) called for Alexie’s works to be recontextualized so that they engender discussion not only about racial justice issues, but also about the systematic sexism faced by women in male-dominated industries and the extent to which artists



should be separated from their art. Bayers (2018) pointed out that *Smoke Signals* is a collaborative creation between screenwriter, director, and actors and contended that it should not be judged in the same way as work produced by Alexie alone. Finding value in the way the film undermines the buddy movie trope to show that Native women are “important to the formation of a Native masculinity” (p. 249), he argued that the film “raises powerful questions about Native masculinity that contribute to undermining the very distorted masculinity exhibited by Alexie’s actions” and concluded that one can study this film without redeeming its writer (p. 242). In a thoughtful pondering of the value of teaching Alexie’s work in the wake of the accusations against him, Spanke (2018) suggested that if Alexie’s works are to be taught, they should be taught “with an eye toward the cracks in the lens, as opposed to simply through it” (p. 106).

I write my analysis of Thomas’s servant-leadership in *Smoke Signals* with an eye toward the cracks in the lens. hooks (2004) called for a “wise and loving politics” (Feminist Manhood) that holds space for critique and contention as we work to dismantle patriarchy. Believing that “there is a creative, life-sustaining, life-enhancing place for the masculine in a nondominator culture,” she pointed to the need for an ethic of love in which men let go of the will to dominate and “choose life over death” (hooks, 2004, *Feminist Manhood*, Introduction). This ethic of love, she explained, is rooted in service. Servant-leadership, in its disruption of the hierarchical notions of long-established power structures (Reynolds, 2016), has the potential to help us move towards a non-patriarchal culture that values a more life-sustaining, life-affirming vision of masculinity. In the character of Thomas in *Smoke Signals*, we see that potential unfold.



THOMAS AND VICTOR

In a small trailer in the middle of the Arizona desert, Thomas Builds-the-Fire asks Suzy Song for a story. “Do you want lies, or do you want truth?” Suzy asks him. “I want both,” he replies. In the film *Smoke Signals*, written by Sherman Alexie and directed by Chris Eyre (1998), Thomas is both truth-teller and story-weaver. He speaks his truth and weaves his stories for Victor Joseph, with whom he has traveled from the Coeur d’Alene Indian reservation in Idaho to retrieve the ashes of Victor’s father, Arnold. Throughout the film, Thomas devotes himself to both Victor and the memory of Victor’s father, even in the face of Victor’s angry efforts to push him away. Thomas’s truth-telling and story-weaving, along with his acts of generosity and presence, are all based on a sense of *connectedness* that he feels for Victor and his father. That sense of connectedness, a key concept in both spiritual and servant-leadership (Jackson & Parry, 2011), is a gift that allows Victor to begin the process of forgiving his father. Paulo Freire (2000) explained that “hope is rooted in men’s incompleteness, from which they move out in constant search—a search which can be carried out only in communion with others” (p. 91). It is just this kind of communion that Thomas provides for Victor.

One of the underlying precepts of servant-leadership is that of nourishing one’s followers to become more whole (Jackson & Parry, 2011). Thomas’s perpetually hopeful stance towards Victor and the memory of Victor’s father, as well as his presence with Victor on the journey to bring Arnold Joseph’s ashes home, create space for the kind of healing that Victor needs to forgive his father and become more whole. Alexie and Eyre use the trope of a buddy road trip movie as a vehicle for Victor and Thomas’s spiritual journey (Slethaug, 2003), exploring the theme of forgiveness and



reconciliation in father-son relationships against the backdrop of the historical trauma of Native American displacement and oppression brought about by colonialism. At different points in the film, Thomas is a prophetic voice for Victor. As their journey progresses, Thomas exhibits four of the characteristics identified by Spears (2010) as fundamental to the development of servant-leaders: empathy, healing, awareness, and commitment to growth.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP

Robert K. Greenleaf (1977) developed his concept of servant-leadership after reading Herman Hesse's (1956) *A Journey to the East* and being inspired by the character of Leo, who first makes himself known as a servant to the protagonist and his companions as they travel on a mythical pilgrimage to the east in search of collective and individual truths, and is later revealed to be the leader of their organization. Greenleaf (2011) defined the servant-leader as "servant first—as Leo was portrayed. Becoming a servant-leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then, conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (p. 25). This vision of a leader as servant first reimagines power, reinventing it "from its highly pervasive, coercive nature" (San Juan, 2005, p. 188) to a "two-way influence between leaders and followers" (Jackson & Parry, 2011, p. 63). According to Greenleaf (2011), the best test of the effectiveness of a servant-leader is this: "Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to be servants?" (p. 25).

Thomas's primary impulse in his relationship with Victor is one of service. By the end of his journey with Thomas, we see Victor becoming healthier and freer because he is able to release much of the anger he had towards his father, approach his father's memory from a more forgiving stance, and begin to take emotional



responsibility for his own life. Allan (2006) pointed out that “to describe and interpret justice and forgiveness from a personal perspective is not only foreign to our modern way of life, but often also brings about an intense nexus of fear, anxiety, and lack of hope” (p. 142). Throughout their journey together, Victor’s irritated and often hostile reactions to Thomas’s service demonstrate that Victor is caught in this nexus. It is Thomas’s gifts of presence, truth-telling, and story-weaving that create the emotional and psychological space Victor needs to face the fear, anxiety, and lack of hope that stem from his father’s abandonment.

SERVANT-LEADERSHIP REVEALED IN *SMOKE SIGNALS*’ CINEMATIC DEVICES

The recurring motifs in *Smoke Signals* offer insights into Thomas’s servant-leader nature and into the development of Victor’s journey to forgive his father. The motifs of fire and ash are central to the film’s *mis-en-scene*. In one of the film’s first scenes, Alexie and Eyre use these motifs to establish Thomas and Victor as two young men connected by intertwining losses. Thomas, whose parents died in a fire when he was an infant, is rescued from that same fire by Victor’s father. Victor twice loses his father: once as a child when Arnold Joseph abandons him and his mother, and again as a young adult when he learns that his father has died in Arizona. Eyre establishes Thomas as the story-weaver through Thomas’s voiceover in the very first scene narrating the events of the Fourth of July fire that took the life of his parents. As Thomas explains that “there are children who aren’t really children at all. They’re just pillars of flames that burn everything they touch,” the flames from the house fire take up the entire frame. When Thomas continues, “There are some children who are just pillars of ash that fall apart as you touch ‘em,” the camera cuts to the smoldering aftermath of the fire. “Me



and Victor,” Thomas explains, “we were children born of flame and ash.”

The title of the film itself, *Smoke Signals*, underscores the theme that the destructive energy of fire can be harnessed to create communication that facilitates healing—between friends, between sons and fathers, and between the past and present (Slethaug, 2003). It is Thomas who insists on communication with Victor from childhood onward, often asking Victor questions about his dad that Victor would rather not have to think about: “Hey Victor, heard your dad left. Why did he leave? Does he hate you?” “Hey, Victor, heard your dad was living in Phoenix, Arizona now?” “Hey, Victor. What do you remember about your dad?” These ever-present questions serve to keep Arnold Joseph at the forefront of Victor’s consciousness. Thomas, the servant-leader, demonstrates an *awareness* (Spears, 2010) of Arnold Joseph’s role in Victor’s pain that refuses to let Victor deny or bury that pain.

Because of the fire that kills Thomas’s parents and forever changes Arnold Joseph, the concept of *home* is intertwined with personal loss and pain for Thomas and Victor, losses that are layered on top of the historical trauma of oppression and displacement experienced by the Coeur d’Alene tribe (Bayers, 2018). The fire happens on Independence Day, a day that represents freedom for most European-Americans, but one that can be tinged with painful irony for Native Americans. Slethaug (2003) noted that the Fourth of July fire “brings home the fact that blame and guilt of personal and cultural tragedies must be accepted and shared before improvements can be made” and that the key to healing and preventing the further erosion of both relationships and culture is the concept of shared responsibility (p. 4). From childhood onward, Thomas feels a connection to, and responsibility for, Victor and the memory of



Arnold Joseph. This connection and sense of responsibility fuels Thomas's *commitment to Victor's growth* (Spears 2010) as he accompanies him on his journey to retrieve the ashes of Arnold Joseph's body, a journey that culminates in Victor releasing Arnold Joseph's ashes into the Spokane River and releasing the anger that he holds towards his father.

Because Alexie and Eyre use the trope of the buddy/road trip movie as a vehicle for Thomas and Victor's spiritual journey, vehicles of transportation are important motifs in the film's *mis-en-scene*, revealing both the chaotic social problems caused by the historic displacement of Native Americans, and the ways in which healthy patterns can arise from both personal and communal chaos (Slethaug, 2003). The first vehicle we see in the film is the broken-down KREZ traffic van, from which Lester Falls-Apart reports the comings and goings of reservation life. We see Lester cheerfully offering his report from this broken down van in 1976 and again in 1988, signaling to the audience that though the underlying social problems of the reservation may remain unchanged, there is also an underlying hopefulness present as well. This underlying hopefulness is also represented in the car that only goes backwards, driven by the two women on the reservation who give Victor and Thomas a ride on the first leg of their journey. Slethaug (2003) points out that this vehicle that only goes backwards is a fitting symbol for a mode of transportation that carries Victor and Thomas off the reservation and into "a headlong pursuit into American values and commodification" (p. 4).

It is important to notice, however, that these two women who provide Victor and Thomas the transportation needed for the first leg of their journey have joyful dispositions, even as they tease them about needing a passport because they are "leavin' the res and going



to a whole different country, cousin.” Thomas trades them a story for the ride, and he tells them an epic tale about Arnold Joseph in the sixties, saying that “he was a perfect hippie because all the hippies were tryin’ to be Indians anyway.” When one of the women playfully proclaims that the story Thomas tells them as payment for the ride is “a fine example of the oral tradition,” she is signaling that Thomas’s epic portrayal of Arnold Joseph, one that differs sharply from Victor’s image of him, is rooted in the traditions of the Coeur d’Alene community. According to Greenleaf (1970), community is central to servant-leadership, allowing individuals to experience connection and interdependence, thereby fostering *individual growth* (Spears 2010).

The bus that carries Victor and Thomas from Spokane to Phoenix on their journey to Arnold Joseph’s trailer in Arizona also represents the movement from chaotic patterns to more healthy ones. The protagonists in road trip movies are typically males experiencing some kind of crisis with masculinity (Bayers, 2018). Victor’s crisis with masculinity is intertwined with his Native American identity, both of which are impacted by the emotional scars left by Arnold Joseph’s abandonment of him, and he experiences this crisis in more acute ways once he is on the bus taking him from Spokane to Phoenix, away from his culture and community. Their encounters with non-natives on the bus spark a conversation between Victor and Thomas about what being a “real Indian” means. After once again becoming irritated with Thomas’s asking him what he remembers about his dad, Victor lectures him about “real” Indian identity, advising him to “quit grinnin’ like an idiot...you gotta look like a warrior,” and telling him to free his hair from his braids and get rid of the suit that he wears all of the time. Thomas, rather than reacting defensively or taking offense, is open to Victor’s advice and delights



in it. He is truly happy to be receiving Victor's attention, but he is also demonstrating an *awareness* (Spears 2010) of a shift in the power dynamic between them, as Victor goes from being annoyed with Thomas to truly wanting to help him. Thomas's openness to Victor's advice makes space for Victor to articulate his understanding of Indian masculinity, and the bus taking them both to Phoenix is a vehicle for the "spiritual homecoming" that awaits Victor at Arnold Joseph's trailer (Slethaug, 2003, p. 4).

Eyre juxtaposes the internal and communal pain Victor and Thomas experience on their journey with the natural beauty of the Idaho and Arizona landscapes, often framing tense, emotional character interactions within the doorways of houses, the windows of cars, or the mirrors of bedrooms, and cutting away to wide or aerial shots of the rolling green hills and tall pines of Idaho or the stark beauty of the Arizona desert. The shots that are framed within doorways, windows, and mirrors often connect Victor's memories of his painful past with his current journey. When Victor initially refuses Thomas's offer of money to help him get to Arizona to retrieve his father's ashes, Victor walks out of the convenience store door, and for a moment, we see the adult Victor in the doorway looking out at the child Victor standing outside. Eyre uses this shot to transition to a memory from Victor's childhood that reveals both the pain and love inherent in his relationship with his father. Later, when Thomas and Victor are in a diner together and Thomas is telling Victor the story of the time Arnold Joseph found him alone at Spokane Falls and took him to Denny's, Victor gets up and goes into the restroom. Eyre cuts to a scene of young Victor walking into his parent's bedroom and finding them passed out drunk on the bed. Victor's parents are framed within the reflection of their bedroom mirror. Eyre then cuts back to a medium close-up shot (MCU)



(Barsam & Monahan, 2019) of adult Victor staring into the diner bathroom mirror, and back to still another shot framed through the window of his parents' bedroom of young Victor throwing beer bottles at his father's truck. Yet another painful scene in which Victor's father hits him for spilling his beer is framed within the windows of Arnold Joseph's truck, the same truck he drives away in when he leaves Victor and his mother.

These tight shots show the audience how close and immediate Victor's pain is, but Eyre also uses them to show us hope in key points in the film. For example, when Thomas tells his epic tale about Arnold Joseph to the two young women driving the backwards car, Eyre frames the shots from the interior of the car through the passenger window, and they alternate between MCUs of Thomas and Victor with a bright blue sky and fluffy white clouds in the background, to close-up shots (CUs) (Barsam & Monahan, 2019) of Thomas's face. These shots allow the audience to see the love and attention with which Thomas delivers his story, and the irritation that registers on Victor's face as he tells it. After Thomas and Victor hop in the car, Eyre cuts to an extreme long shot of the car driving backwards across the reservation, taking Thomas and Victor on the first leg of their journey. Eyre often uses extreme long shots or aerial shots to represent movement in *Smoke Signals*—movement towards Arizona and back home, and movement towards healing and forgiveness. Thomas's stories—which paint Victor's father in often epic, mythic strokes—demonstrate his *empathy* (Spears, 2010) for both Arnold Joseph and Victor, and create space for that movement.

THE PROPHETIC POWER OF THOMAS'S STORY-WEAVING AND TRUTH-TELLING

The servant-leader is sensitive to the concerns and well-being of others. Beyond their ability to recognize the problems of those they



seek to serve, servant-leaders must commit themselves to the time necessary to address those concerns in order to help those they serve reach their full potential (Northouse, 2019). Robert Greenleaf (2011) believed that the servant-leaders among us are often “prophetic voices of great clarity...addressing the problems of the day and pointing to a better way to live fully and serenely in these times” (p. 22) as they focus on the well-being of people in their communities (Greenleaf, 1970). The stories Thomas tells Victor about his father may not be strictly factual, but they place Arnold Joseph and Victor’s struggles within the broader context of the struggles of their Native American community. Indeed, he places their journey within that context as he and Victor walk through the Arizona desert to find Suzy Song and Arnold Joseph’s trailer,

We’ve been travelin’ a long time, ain’t it? I mean Columbus shows up, and we start walkin’ away from that beach, tryin’ to get away, and then Custer moves into the neighborhood drivin’ down all the property values. Then old Harry Truman drops the bomb, and we gotta keep on walkin’ somewhere.

Armbruster-Sandoval (2008) notes that this bit of story-weaving also critiques the “hidden addiction” of U.S. militarism (p. 131). And while Thomas’s mythic, humorous, not-always-factual stories frustrate Victor, they serve the prophetic purpose of holding Victor’s father up in a different light for him, and create an opening for him to eventually hear important truths about both Arnold Joseph and himself.

We see the influence of Thomas’s prophetic story-weaving in Victor’s realization that Arnold Joseph told Suzy Song a false ending to the story about their basketball game with some Jesuits in order to make Victor look good. In that moment in his journey, after arriving at his father’s and Suzy Song’s trailers in the middle of the desert,



Victor is able to see the truth of the love behind his father's lie. However, painful memories can be debilitating in their power to generate resentment and block an individual's ability to let go and heal (Armbruster-Sandoval, 2020). Victor still has much healing to do as he and Thomas journey back home in his father's truck, the same truck Arnold Joseph used to drive away from Victor and his mother when Victor was a boy. As a weary Victor tells Thomas that he's tired of his stories and that his dad was nothing more than a drunk who beat him and his mom, Thomas shifts from mythic story-weaving to unflinching truth-telling as he explodes at Victor: "Your dad was more than that! You've got it all wrong, Victor! Maybe you don't know who *you* are!" When Victor lashes out and says, "I wish he would have let you burn in that fire, you know? Then he wouldn't have left me," Thomas returns with, "He was always leaving, Victor!" This argument with Thomas, which culminates in Victor crashing into a car stopped on the highway, is the final catalyst for Victor to make peace with his past and forgive his father. Paulo Freire (2000) described those who are committed to human liberation as "not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled" and to commit themselves "within history" to fight on the side of the oppressed (p. 39). While Thomas commits himself to Victor's struggle first by offering him financial support, and then by accompanying him on his journey, he is unafraid to enter into crucial dialogue with Victor, placing Victor's struggle to reconcile with the memory of his father within the context of the larger struggles of their people, and offering Victor difficult but liberating truth about his father.

San Juan (2005) noted that applying a psychoanalytical lens to leadership can help us understand the way leaders deal with power, noting that a leader's feeling of personal power "is nurtured through



childhood experiences” (p. 199). One’s early experience with family relationships influences the way one understands power dynamics. Victor’s earliest childhood experiences were with alcoholic parents. His father abandoned him after being unable to give up alcohol as Victor’s mother did. Thomas was raised by his grandmother because his parents died in the same fire that Arnold Joseph both started and saved him from. Neither Victor nor Thomas have fathers who can shape their identities in positive ways, but their relationship with the women who raised them provide them with a “gender complementarity” that allows them to successfully journey together towards wholeness (Bayers, 2018, p. 252). This gender complementarity is evident in two back-to-back scenes that take place before Victor and Thomas leave together for Arizona. When Victor’s mother Arlene drops a piece of fry bread on the floor and says “damn arthritis,” Victor responds by rubbing her hands and saying soothingly, “hurting bad today, ain’t it?” Eyre cuts directly from this to a scene of Thomas kneading bread for his grandmother in their kitchen. We see Thomas’s servant-leader nature as he stands in the kitchen and works while his grandmother sits and looks up at him. Victor’s scene with his mother demonstrates his *potential* for servant-leadership as well. The positions of Victor and his mother are inverted from Thomas and his grandmother’s positions, with Victor seated, looking up with love and compassion at his mother. While Victor may not have the impulse to be a servant *first* (Greenleaf, 2011), he has the potential to develop that impulse, and the prophetic power of Thomas’s story-weaving and truth-telling will help him do that.

CONCLUSION

One of the underlying precepts of servant-leadership is nourishing others to become whole (Jackson & Parry, 2011). In



offering Victor his money, his presence, and most importantly, his stories, Thomas provides Victor with the nourishment he needs to forgive his father and to begin the process of becoming whole. Paulo Freire (2000) taught that humanization is “the people’s vocation,” a vocation that is “affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (pp. 43-44). In *Smoke Signals*, Thomas Builds-the-Fire helps Victor recognize his yearning to be free of his anger towards his father, allowing him to recover the humanity that anger and pain had cost him. Thomas’s sense of connectedness to Victor and Arnold Joseph, his commitment to Victor’s growth, and his servant-leader characteristics of empathy, healing, and awareness, allow Victor to begin the process of forgiving his father and becoming more whole. Through his story-weaving and truth-telling, Thomas is a prophetic voice pointing Victor to “a better way” that will allow him “to live more fully and serenely” (Greenleaf, 2011, p. 22).

At the end of the film, Victor gives Thomas some of his father’s ashes. Both of these children of fire and ash, whose identities have been intertwined since infancy, have the same idea: to release Arnold Joseph’s ashes at Spokane Falls. “Your father will rise like a salmon, Victor! He will rise!” Thomas exclaims. Victor, rather than show irritation, simply replies that while he had the same idea, he never thought of his dad rising like a salmon, only that “it would be more like throwing something away when it is no use.” In the final scene of the film, Thomas’s grandmother, upon welcoming him home, says, “Tell me what happened, Thomas. Tell me what’s going to happen.” Thomas closes his eyes, and Eyre cuts to an aerial shot of the Spokane River winding its way to Spokane Falls, where Victor releases his father’s ashes with a loud, cleansing cry. In a voiceover, Thomas asks a series of questions about forgiving fathers: “How do



we forgive our fathers? Do we forgive our fathers in our age, or in theirs?... If we forgive our fathers, what's left?" Due in no small part to Thomas's prophetic story-weaving and truth-telling, Victor will have the chance to find out.

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