

Series:
Indigenous Inspirations

Each episode in this series takes an element of wisdom from an Indigenous people, meets those people, and reflects on that wisdom from the perspectives of contemplative Christianity and one other world religion.



Episode 2:

Attention among the Evenki of Siberia

To attend is to allow another life to matter before deciding what it means for me, for us

The path is narrow, scarcely more than a soft opening between larch and birch. A reindeer moves ahead through the undergrowth. Behind it, two people walk without hurry, placing their feet among roots, stones and fallen branches. The forest appears quiet, yet small movements are everywhere: a branch newly bent, moss disturbed beside the path, the faint impression of a hoof in damp ground.

The older walker pauses. Nothing dramatic has happened. A mark that another traveller might pass without seeing has entered her attention. She looks towards the trees, then back towards the ground. The younger walk-

er follows her gaze. For a few moments, they remain still, listening to a place that offers no explanation in words.

Then they continue. The path has become more than a way of getting somewhere. It carries traces of animals, weather and human passage. Nothing has spoken, yet the forest is full of news.

This imaginary scene draws upon documented accounts of Evenki walking, tracking and learning. It may help us to picture attention as part of the ordinary movements of life in the taiga, that swampy coniferous forest of high northern latitudes between the tundra and the steppes of Siberia.

The Evenki are an Indigenous people of central and eastern Siberia, with a living tradition of nomadic reindeer herding among the river-threaded forests and long winters of the taiga. Their lives today include village life as well as seasonal movement with the herds. Among the Orochen-Evenki communities described by researchers in southeastern Siberia, travelling the forest paths involves knowledge acquired through long acquaintance with the land and its inhabitants.

The ground holds traces of lives already passing through. Learning to find one's way includes learning to recognise those lives. Attention becomes a way of entering more fully into a world already inhabited by oth-

ers. *Gautier 2019; Brandišauskas 2012*

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Gautier 2019; Brandišauskas 2012

Learning to listen

An actual Evenki reindeer herder, Tamara Andreeva, gives this attentiveness a voice. She speaks of a knowledge waiting around us, and of the listening through which we may begin to receive it: "natural environment knows everything, when you learn to listen to it, it tells you everything". *Andreeva 2007*

Her words invite us to pause beside the forest path. In the lives described by the researchers, observation grows through experience and conversation. People gather in the evening to compare what they have encoun-

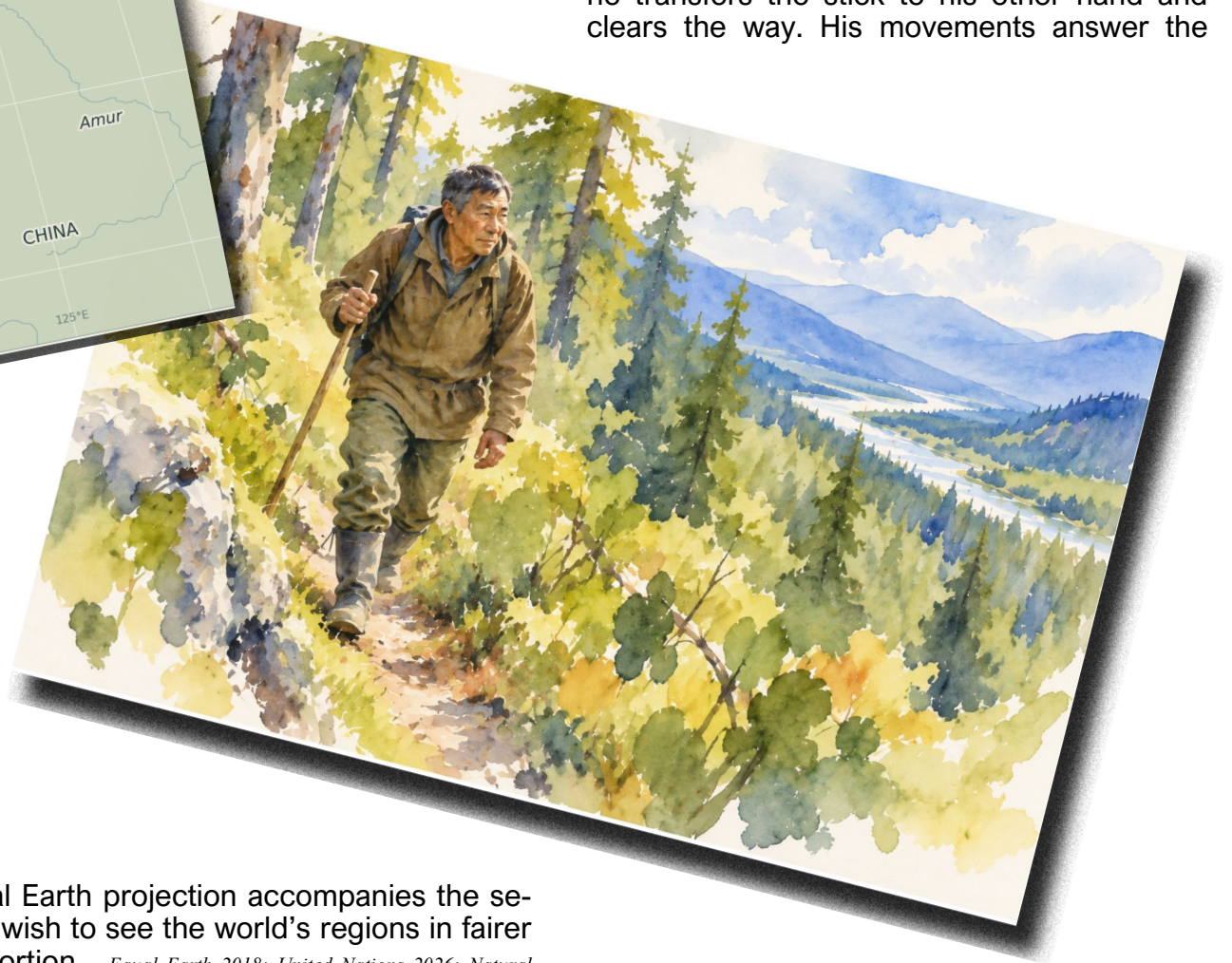


Traces of another life become visible through patient looking.



Learning the path

One recorded scene brings this attention close enough to imagine. A man named Irgichi follows an animal's trail through the thicket, carrying a stick to steady and assist his movement. When branches obstruct him, he transfers the stick to his other hand and clears the way. His movements answer the



tered during the day; younger members of the camp listen and learn alongside them. What one person has noticed becomes something others can carry. *Lavrillier and Gabyshev 2017*

The question that reaches us is simple enough to accompany us wherever we might be. What have we passed so often that we have ceased to notice it? Perhaps listening begins when we allow the familiar to have something more to tell us.

The regional map locates the Zabaikal setting of part of our account, within the much wider geography of Evenki life. Its

Equal Earth projection accompanies the series' wish to see the world's regions in fairer proportion. *Equal Earth 2018; United Nations 2026; Natural Earth*



ground and the growth around him, in a field-work account of Evenki walking. *Safonova and Sántha 2013, cited in Fernández Velasco and Gleizer 2024*

In separate fieldwork among Orochen-Evenki communities in Zabaikal Krai, Donatas Brandišauskas describes hunters recognising animals' living places through their tracks and movements. People also leave signs along their routes through which others can understand something of their passage. These practices belong within the responsibilities of hunting, herding and living together, and

within the moral relationships of those communities. *Brandišauskas 2012*

As we read about these lives, a question may arise within our own: what might become visible if we gave our surroundings a little more time? The question travels home with us, along a pavement, into a kitchen, through the familiar movements of a working day. A bird returns to a small patch of ground; someone at the table has grown unusually quiet. Attention begins to

recognise a life continuing beyond the edges of our own concerns.

A small place in a living world

Baeye dunne toktan, “Man is but a speck of dirt”, says an Evenki proverb presented in a collaborative museum exhibition. “Dirt” reminds humans that they are part of the ecosystems. The exhibition places these words within a sense of human responsibility towards the other beings of the natural world. Smallness can invite us to consider how much surrounds and sustains us. *Pitt Rivers Museum*

We may hear in those words a question about our own place. How might we live if our concerns left more room for the lives beside us? The question belongs to our encounter with the saying, and every one of us may find a different beginning in it.

What gratitude teaches us to see

In the previous episode, we approached gift and gratitude through Ainu traditions. “What you bless, you learn to see” was a phrase we formed in response to that encounter. It expresses something we were beginning to learn as readers: gratitude can draw us closer to the particular being, place or kindness through which a gift has reached us.

The Evenki accounts invite us to linger with that particularity. We may allow them to question our habits while leaving their meanings rooted in the lives from which they come. The reflections that follow are ours to under-

take, in conversation with Jewish and Christian voices that have also found spiritual depth in the act of attending.

Leaving room for another life

“Do not scorn any person, and do not discount any thing,” teaches Ben Azzai, an early second-century Jewish sage. The saying continues by recognising that every person has an hour and every thing a place. There is room here to pause before the familiar verdict forms: how much of another person remains unseen when we believe we already know their worth? *Ben Azzai, Avot 4:3*

Our judgements can arrive so quickly that we scarcely experience them as judgements. A voice, an accent, an unfamiliar custom, and the door begins to close. Attention leaves the door open a little longer, allowing another life to exceed our account of it.

Letting the journey become a blessing

“On seeing mountains, hills, seas, rivers or deserts one says, ‘Blessed be He who made creation.’” In the Mishnah, compiled around 200 CE, an encounter with a landscape becomes an occasion for blessing. Seeing calls forth words, and the words turn the heart towards the Creator. The traveller has somewhere to go, yet the journey includes this moment of recognition. *Mishnah c. 200*

We, too, pass through places that can disappear beneath our familiarity with them.

The morning sky becomes an indication of the weather; a river becomes something crossed on the way to work. What happens when we allow a moment of blessing to enter that passage?

Waiting for beauty to answer

“My question had come from my observation of them, and their reply came from their beauty of order.” Writing around 400 CE, Augustine recalls questioning the earth, the sea and the heavens in his search for God. Their beauty directs him towards their Maker. He brings a question to creation and allows what he encounters to shape the answer. *Augustine c. 400*

There is a patience we might borrow from this exchange. We can remain with something beautiful before reaching for an explanation or a photograph. Perhaps the light upon a wall can hold our attention for a while, without our needing to carry it away.

Holding a small thing in wonder

“I looked thereupon with eye of my understanding, and thought: What may this be?” In her fourteenth-century account of her revelations, Julian of Norwich sees a small thing, the size of a hazelnut, lying in her hand. She wonders what it is and how anything so small can endure. She comes to understand it as all that is made, held in being by the love of God. *Julian, late 14th century*

Her question gives the small thing time

to disclose its significance. We might carry that question into our own surroundings, where so much is touched and used and scarcely seen. What may this be, this fragile life before me, whose existence I have come to take for granted?

Returning gently

“I keep myself by a simple attention, and a general fond regard to God.” In the seventeenth century, Brother Lawrence describes an affectionate attention to God that accompanies his life. The gentleness of his language makes room for our own wandering minds. We can return, and return again, with something of the tenderness we bring to a person we love. *Lawrence, 17th century*

An ordinary task may become a place for that return. As we prepare food or put things in order, we can remember the lives our work touches. The day already contains occasions for loving regard, waiting within what our hands have to do.

Making room to receive

“Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love.” These words appear in Simone Weil’s notebooks, collected after her death in “Gravity and Grace” in 1947. They invite us to consider how deeply attention might change the one who attends. Faith and love give us the courage to remain receptive, even when we cannot determine what we shall receive. *Weil 1947*



Care passes through the hands, and knowledge through shared work.

We may recognise how readily our concerns fill the available space. Even while listening, we prepare our reply; even while looking, we decide what something means for us. For a moment, can we let the encounter unfold before asking it to serve our understanding?

Keeping wonder alive

“Indifference to the sublime wonders of living is the root of sin.” In “God in Search of Man”, published in 1955, Abraham Joshua Heschel places wonder close to the heart of our spiritual responsibility. His words ask us to consider what happens when we grow insensible to the preciousness of being alive. A diminished capacity for wonder may also diminish our willingness to care. *Heschel 1955*

Modern life offers its own occasions for renewed astonishment. A message carries affection across an ocean; an image reveals the intricate life of a cell. We can ask whether what we discover is enlarging our care, drawing distant lives into the circle of those who matter to us.

Widening the circle of care

Rabbi Shefa Gold asks us to “open your eyes and heart to the one who stands before you”. Writing in 2006, she places these words within the practice of conferring blessing. Blessing asks us to recognise the particular gift another person carries. We attend long enough to find words that belong to this person, in this encounter. Gold 2006

Here the reflection comes close to home. Someone we love, someone whose work supports our day, someone whose life seems remote from ours: each has a world of relationships and concerns that our first glance cannot contain. The circle of our care can widen through the patient recognition of one life at a time.

The forest path remains with us as we return to our own surroundings. Other lives are passing here, too, leaving traces we may learn to recognise. Today we might follow one of those traces with a little more patience, and allow what we find to matter.

Following the paths further

If you’d like to linger with Evenki lives and culture, you can explore the Evenki Atlas. Rooted in collaboration with Evenki knowledge holders around Iyengra in Sakha-Yakutia, it brings together oral histories, place names, maps and accounts of a changing environment. Here, contemporary technology helps to carry living knowledge between generations, offering another occasion to listen. *Evenki Atlas; Gautier 2019*

The illustrations in today’s episode offer imagined moments inspired by the activities discussed here. They were created with AI for this essay; their figures and settings are illustrations, with the linked research and Atlas providing the documentary accounts.

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Endnotes

Illustrations: All illustrations are research-based AI generated.
Web URLs: September 2026

Andreeva 2007 -- Tamara Andreeva, Evenki reindeer herder, recorded in 2007; English rendering published in Alexandra Lavrillier and Semen Gabyshev, An Arctic Indigenous Knowledge System of Landscape, Climate, and Human Interactions: Evenki Reindeer Herders and Hunters (Kulturstiftung Sibirien, 2017), p. 16. The lower-case opening follows the published excerpt. The passage supplies no original-language wording or indication of whether this statement was spoken in Evenki or Russian, so no transliteration of the quotation is offered. Her name follows the Latin-script form in the publication. Published source <https://library.arcticportal.org/1966/1/lavgab.pdf#page=16>.

Augustine c. 400 -- Augustine of Hippo, Confessions X.6.9, translated by Albert C. Outler, Confessions and Enchiridion (1955. The date refers approximately to composition. Augustine’s surrounding passage distinguishes the creatures from their Creator; the reflection preserves their role in directing his attention towards God. Outler translation <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/augustine/conf.pdf>.

Ben Azzai, Avot 4:3 -- Pirkei Avot 4:3, a saying attributed to Ben Azzai, active in the early second century CE. The concise English wording is retained from the preceding draft; translations of the second clause vary. Sefaria’s displayed translation reads “do not despise any man, and do not discriminate against anything”. The continuing clauses concerning an hour and a place support the reflection. The date refers to the teacher, rather than an independently dated utterance. Text and translations https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.4.3.

Brandišauskas 2012 -- Donatas Brandišauskas, “Making a Home in the Taiga: Movements, Paths and Signs among Orochen-Evenki Hunters and Herders of Zabaikal Krai (South East Siberia)”, Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics 6(1), 2012. Fieldwork supports the account of tracks, animals’ living places, human signs, wellbeing and moral relationships. Article and downloadable text <https://ojs.utlib.ee/index.php/JEF/article/view/22601>.

Equal Earth 2018 -- Bojan Šavrič, Tom Patterson and Bernhard Jenny developed the Equal Earth projection in 2018. It pre-



serves relative areas, so that a world map can represent the sizes of regions without the high-latitude enlargement associated with Mercator. It necessarily distorts other properties, including some shapes and distances. The accompanying regional maps use the same projection; its global advantage is less conspicuous at this scale. Its use here also expresses an editorial wish to look beyond inherited habits of representation and appreciate the world's peoples more generously. PROJ's Equal Earth documentation and original-paper reference <https://proj.org/en/stable/operations/projections/eqearth.html>.

Evenki Atlas -- Evenki Atlas, an online cultural atlas developed through collaboration involving Evenki co-researchers, Snowchange Cooperative and ELOKA. Readers can explore Indigenous knowledge, lives and cultural accounts at the Atlas website <https://www.evenki-atlas.org/index.html>, which requires JavaScript. Its Iyengra focus is distinct from the Zabaikal fieldwork discussed earlier in this episode.

Fernández Velasco and Gleizer 2024 -- Pablo Fernández Velasco and Anna Gleizer, "Mental maps, practical mastery and environmental experience: an analysis of the wayfinding culture of Evenki reindeer herders and hunters", *The Journal of Navigation* 76(4–5), pp. 590–601. Published online 26 January 2024, in an issue labelled 2023; the reference uses the online publication year. Section 2 provides the walking account and its attribution. Article <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0373463324000018>.

Gautier 2019 -- Agnieszka Gautier, "A living atlas comes to life", *ELOKA / National Snow and Ice Data Center*, 27 February 2019. The project account describes the geographical spread and variety of Evenki lives, the Atlas collaboration, seasonal camps, reindeer transport, practical work and knowledge transmission. It supports the opening and the further-exploration paragraph. Project account <https://eloka.nsidc.org/our-work/stories-events/living-atlas-comes-life>.

Gold 2006 -- Rabbi Shefa Gold, *Torah Journeys: The Inner Path to the Promised Land, "Vezot HaBrakha"*, copyright 2006. The quoted words are an exact excerpt from her sentence about the practice of conferring blessing. Author's text <https://www.rabbishefagold.com/vezot-habrakha/>.

Heschel 1955 -- Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955), p. 43. The wording with "wonders" follows David Hoffman's quotation for the Jewish Theological Seminary, "Why Religion?" (12 November 2010. Some reproductions use the singular "wonder"; this draft follows the named intermediary, rather than claiming independent collation against a first edition. JTS quotation

and page reference <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/why-religion/>.

Julian, late fourteenth century -- Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Long Text, chapter 5; English text edited by Grace Warrack (1901). The passage belongs to Julian's account of her revelations, rather than an observation of an actual hazelnut. The broad date avoids assigning a precise year to the Long Text's composition. Chapter 5 in the complete text <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/52958/52958-h/52958-h.htm>.

Lavrillier and Gabyshev 2017 -- Alexandra Lavrillier and Semen Gabyshev, *An Arctic Indigenous Knowledge System of Landscape, Climate, and Human Interactions: Evenki Reindeer Herders and Hunters* (Kulturstiftung Sibirien, 2017), pp. 15–16. The book was co-written by an anthropologist and a reindeer herder. The evening discussions described on p. 16 include collective analysis and participation by younger people. These accounts come from the book's own research communities and are not presented here as observations of Irgichi's camp. Complete book <https://library.arcticportal.org/1966/1/lavgab.pdf>.

Lawrence, seventeenth century -- Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, Second Letter, in the English text hosted by the Christian Classics Ethereal Library. The excerpt retains the supplied draft's normalisation of "GOD" to "God". The broad date avoids assigning an unverified year to the letter. Text <https://ccel.org/ccel/lawrence/practice.all.html>.

Mishnah c. 200 -- Mishnah Berakhot 9:2, in the translation by Dr Joshua Kulp, *Mishnah Yomit*. The approximate date refers to the compilation of the Mishnah. The square brackets around "On seeing" belong to the translation. Text and translations https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Berakhot.9.2.

Natural Earth -- Original regional map designs created for this series from Natural Earth 1:50 million land, lake and river data, released into the public domain. The geographic data may be modified and republished, including commercially, without permission. No existing cartographer's finished map is reproduced. The Episode 2 locator indicates the broad setting of the Zabaikal accounts; it does not delimit Evenki territory or locate a particular clan. Natural Earth terms of use <https://www.naturalearthdata.com/about/terms-of-use/>.

Pitt Rivers Museum -- "Wandering in Other Worlds: Evenki Cosmology and Shamanic Traditions", a collaborative exhibition curated by Alexander Varlamov, Galina Veretnova

and Anya Gleizer, arising from work with Evenki communities in 2019. The museum presents *Baeye dunne toktan* as an Evenki proverb and translates it as "Man is but a speck of dirt". We reproduce the museum's Latin-script rendering; the source does not specify the Evenki dialect or transliteration system, or establish the proverb's age or geographical distribution. This independently documented proverb is distinct from Tamara Andreeva's statement. [Exhibition and source] (<https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/wandering-in-other-worlds>): <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/wandering-in-other-worlds>

Safonova and Sántha 2013, cited in Fernández Velasco and Gleizer 2024 -- Tatiana Safonova and István Sántha, *Culture Contact in Evenki Land: A Cybernetic Anthropology of the Baikal Region* (Global Oriental, 2013), p. 141. The description of Irgichi is paraphrased from the passage reproduced in section 2 of the 2024 article below. The original book was not independently consulted for this draft. Publisher's record <https://brill.com/display/title/21946>.

United Nations 2026 -- On 4 September 2026, the UN General Assembly adopted the "Correct the Map" text promoting more equitable cartographic representation. Contemporary reporting identifies its endorsement of Equal Earth. This is an endorsement encouraging its use, rather than the invention of the projection or a requirement that every map use it. UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa announcement <https://www.un.org/osaa/en/news/victory-africa-un-votes-resolution-correct-map>; Associated Press report, 4 September 2026 <https://apnews.com/article/b138fe9f76d7ff54cc7d5c9b1ddfa983>.

Weil 1947 -- Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (1947), a posthumous selection from her notebooks compiled by Gustave Thibon; English translation *Gravity and Grace, "Attention and Will"*. The linked English excerpt is labelled 1952. The citation year identifies first French publication, rather than a verified date of notebook composition. English excerpt <https://rohandrape.net/ut/rtcc-text/Weil1952d.pdf>.

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