

## *Prologue*

# My Great-Grandfather Keesta

Every protocol had been observed between the whaling chief and the spirit of the whale. Keesta had thrown the harpoon, and the whale had accepted it, had grabbed and held onto the harpoon according to the agreement they had made through prayers and petitions. Harmony prevailed, whaler and whale were one, *heshook-ish tsawalk*.

All of a sudden something went wrong, some disharmony arose, some disunity intruded, and the whale turned and began to tow Keesta and his paddlers straight off shore. Keesta took inventory. Everyone in the whaling canoe remained true to the protocols – cleansed, purified, and in harmony. Prayer songs intensified. Still, the great whale refused to turn toward the beach, heading straight off shore. Keesta and the paddlers had kept true to their agreements, and now there seemed nothing left to do except to cut the *atlu*, the rope attached to the whale.

Keesta took his knife, and as he moved to cut the rope, Ah-up-wha-eeek (Wren) landed on the whale and spoke to Keesta: “Tell the whale to go back to where it was harpooned.” Keesta spoke to the whale, and immediately the great whale turned according to the word of Wren, the little brown bird, and returned to where it was first harpooned, and there it died.

After the whale had been towed ashore, Keesta discovered, as he had suspected, that the disharmony and disunity had intruded at home. When his wife had heard that the whale had taken the harpoon, she had roused herself and prematurely broken away from her ritual in order to make welcome preparations. At the point when she began to go about her life in disharmony from the rest was exactly when the great whale had begun to tow Keesta and his paddlers off shore.

## *Introduction*

# Development of an Indigenous Theory

In the Nuu-chah-nulth language, *heshook-ish tsawalk* means “everything is one.” *Heshook-ish tsawalk* is a Nuu-chah-nulth perspective that is inclusive of all reality, both physical and metaphysical.<sup>1</sup> It is the thesis of this book and consequently the basis for the development of an indigenous theory. *Heshook-ish tsawalk* poses the theoretical proposition that everything is one. Thus it is called the theory of Tsawalk. The notion that all things are one stems directly from assumptions found in Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories that predate the conscious historical notion of civilization and scientific progress. This theory provides another interpretation about the nature of existence based on Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories in contrast to the nature of existence suggested by origin stories that are evolution-based.

Clement C.J. Webb in *A History of Philosophy* maintains that modern civilization begins with “leaving off telling tales” (Webb 1959, 9). That is, according to this philosopher, modern civilization could not begin until people turned away from their ancient origin “tales” and began to think in scientific terms. In contrast to this view, the theory of Tsawalk not only begins with these “tales,” or origin stories, but also depends on these “tales” both as the foundation of knowledge about the state of existence and as a guide for its interpretation. *Heshook-ish tsawalk* (everything is one) is a common idea today, particularly in the environmental movement, and for this reason I try to explain and clarify some of its traditional meanings.<sup>2</sup> *Heshook-ish tsawalk* means more than the unity of the physical universe. It means more than the empirically based meaning attached to the word “holism.”

“We are holistic thinkers too!” a professor at the University of British Columbia declared somewhat defensively. No doubt holistic thinking that assumes the unity of the spiritual and physical domains of reality

has always played some part in Western thought. Yet, from an outsider's perspective such as mine, I find it doubtful that holistic thinking could be considered an overriding theme in patterns of Western thought. There is instead a prevailing tendency to compartmentalize experience and thus assume that some parts have no relationship to other parts. For example, in *Philosophers on Education: Six Essays on the Foundations of Western Thought*, the authors state: "The world abounds in separations which have been overdone, which ignore the basic character of the experiential continuum. Thus are separated school and society, child and curriculum, method and subject matter, to name a few with immediate educational significance. The separations are useful, even vital, but imply no final disconnection" (Brumbaugh and Lawrence 1963, 136).

The "experiential continuum" in education is fragmented first between school and society and then into myriad departments and knowledge disciplines, just as it is fragmented into myriad categories within the social, political, and economic dimensions of human existence. These separations are useful, declare the authors, but the "experiential continuum" seems to have been forgotten or ignored.

John Ralston Saul provides another perspective on the fragmentation phenomena observed in Western philosophy. He argues that in spite of the different labels attached to various "ages" (Reason, Enlightenment, and Romanticism) in the Western world, the past 500 years may be called the Age of Reason. The "Dictatorship of Reason," he argues, has virtually excluded other equally important human characteristics: "Reason began, abruptly, to separate itself from and to outdistance the other more or less recognized human characteristics – spirit, appetite, faith and emotion, but also intuition, will and, most important, experience. This gradual encroachment on the foreground continues today. It has reached a degree of imbalance so extreme that the mythological importance of reason obscures all else and has driven the other elements into the marginal frontiers of doubtful respectability" (Saul 1993, 15).

Reason, or rationality, is a cornerstone of science. Saul does not argue against reason but against what he considers to be an "extreme" emphasis on it, almost to the exclusion of other human characteristics that may be termed metaphysical, such as spirit and faith. The implication, from my perspective, is that reason, or human cognition, may not be the sole source of knowledge, that "faith and spirit" may also play a significant and alternative role to human reason.

What is the source of this imbalance between reason and spirit? The imbalance can be traced to scientific methodology. In *Wisdom of the Elders*, Peter Knudtson and David Suzuki state:

Werner Heisenberg discovered that we could never know what Nature is like because in order to observe it, we have to pin it down and thus change it; Niels Bohr found that the properties of subatomic particles could be described only by probability, never with absolute certainty. Parts of nature and other systems were shown to interact *synergistically* so that the behavior and properties of a system as a whole cannot be predicted on the basis of what is known about its individual components. Thus, while science yields powerful insights into isolated fragments of the world, the sum total of these insights is a disconnected, inadequate description of the whole. (Knudtson and Suzuki 1992, xxii)

Werner Heisenberg identifies two limitations of science in the above quotation: first, “Nature” it seems does not hold still for the research scientist so that reliable data reflective of nature can be collected; second, the methodology of science is predicated upon reductionism and the examination of isolated variables, which “yields powerful insights into isolated fragments of the world,” but the sum of which is only a fragmented description of reality. The need to focus on isolated variables automatically obscures any assumption about the general nature of interrelationships and connections between variables, obscures what Robert Brumbaugh and Nathaniel Lawrence call the “experiential continuum.” In addition, scientific experimentation that finds no significant relationship between variables directly implies fragmentation, although it does not necessarily prove that this is the case. Nevertheless, if two variables are found not to be related, does this use of language not indicate that the universe is fragmented according to scientific criteria? Not only does this use of language, “not significantly related,” reflect a scientific view of existence, but it is also reflected generally in the fragmentation of Western thought – in the separation of church and state, for example – and furthermore in Western policies and practices.

Some scientists have recognized this uncertainty about whether or not the universe can be in a state of fragmentation. Recent discoveries in physics now challenge earlier ideas that space and physical objects are separate. It turns out that they are not. Einstein’s theory of relativity says that matter cannot be separated from its field of gravity (Capra 1991, 231). This theory shattered the nineteenth-century assumption that space and matter are separate. Fritjof Capra maintains that the reality of the universe is not so much described by matter and space as by a quantum field in which are found local condensations of particles (matter), or concentrations of energy that come and go, “dissolving into the underlying [quantum] field” (ibid.). The universe can more accurately

be described as a quantum field that is present everywhere in space and yet in its particle aspect has a discontinuous, granular structure. The universe is, therefore, not space and matter according to the old scientific paradigm but a quantum field. Capra concludes: "Thus modern physics shows us ... that material objects are not distinct entities, but are inseparably linked to their environment; that their properties can only be understood in terms of their interaction with the rest of the world" (ibid., 231).

From my perspective it appears that science, in order to gain some insight into the world, began first by isolating fragments of it and studying these in relation to other isolated fragments (known as variables) but then discovered through physics that knowledge of isolated fragments cannot completely explain what Brumbaugh and Lawrence have called the "experiential continuum," or the dynamic nature of existence. Thomas Berry provides another example related to this discussion about recent findings in physics:

The unity of the entire complex of galactic systems is among the most basic experience of contemporary physics. It is especially important in this discussion to recognize the unity of the total process, from that first unimaginable moment of cosmic emergence through all its subsequent forms of expression until the present. This unbreakable bond of relatedness that makes of the whole a universe becomes increasingly apparent to scientific formulation or understanding. In virtue of this relatedness, everything is intimately present to everything else in the universe. Nothing is completely itself without everything else. (Berry 1988, 91)

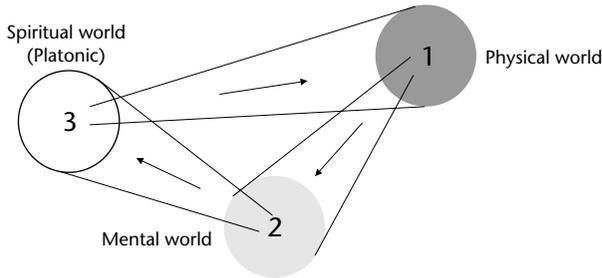
The new findings about the nature of the universe describe empirical reality as concentrations of energy that can dissolve into the underlying quantum field, and these same findings indicate that "everything is intimately present to everything else in the universe." In other words, material objects are no longer perceived as independent entities but rather as "local condensations" of the quantum field or as "concentrations of energy" that are totally dependent upon, and inseparable from, the field. Empirical reality is more than meets the scientific eye. Underlying an unbelievably diverse creation of matter and life forms is a quantum field that appears to be a common source of experience. This new scientific paradigm may have far-reaching effects.

The corollary to the old view about an empirically observable universe is the assumption that human cognition or reason alone is required to

Figure 1

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Plato's three worlds



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Source: Adapted from Penrose 1993.

advance knowledge and discover truth. Webb's view that civilization could not progress until tribal myths were discarded rejects the meta-physical viewpoint embedded in these myths in favour of scientific reason. There is no question that human reason has an enormous capacity to discover and advance knowledge. In question is its presumed supremacy in, and exclusive rights to, knowledge acquisition.

The assumption that knowledge is acquired only through human reason may be predicated upon the worldview that primary experience is physical or empirical and that other experiences are secondary. An extreme interpretation of this view is that all spiritual reality is simply an imaginary creation of the human mind. All extraordinary human experiences that cannot be explained by empirical means are mere delusions or figments of human imagination. This assumption can now be challenged from the vantage point of the new physics.

Curiously, or ironically, the mathematician Roger Penrose, as an apt metaphor to explain the mysterious relationship between the Platonic mathematical world, the physical world, and the mental world, invokes Plato's forms. Although Penrose does not claim that the physical world arises from the Platonic world, only that it is intimately related, he acknowledges that Plato himself would have insisted that the world of perfect forms (mathematical in this case) is primary.

As Penrose says: "In some way, each of the three worlds, the Platonic mathematical, the physical, and the mental, seems mysteriously to 'emerge' from – or at least to be intimately related to – a small part of its predecessor (the worlds being taken cyclically)" (Penrose 1993, 416).

Plato was certain that a world of perfect forms existed independently of the human mind. What Penrose seeks is mathematical truth. Where do the forms come from? Do they arise purely from the mind or independently from some other source? Penrose ultimately speculates that “our mathematical understanding might result from some unfathomable algorithm” (ibid., 144) and consequently concludes that “whatever brain activity is responsible for consciousness (at least in this particular manifestation) it must depend upon a physics that lies beyond computational simulation” (ibid., 411).

Richard Tarnas, in *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*, suggests that an unnatural separation between the human mind and heart/soul/spirit has taken place in Western philosophy, a sort of cultural and psychic lobotomy. The preeminence of human cognition, or reason, in Western culture constrains humans to focus on physical experience, subsuming soul, or spirit. If all truth is essentially empirical, then cognition alone is sufficient. However, if experience is more than empirical, human reason by itself may be insufficient to access the whole of existence. To be sure, human reason is necessary for human consciousness, and it is the only scientifically known means of human understanding. Nevertheless, it is possible that the human brain, in addition to being an active cognition centre, may also be an important *information-coordinating centre*.

In the same way that Plato assumed the primacy of perfect forms over the physical world, the theory of Tsawalk discussed in this book assumes a spiritual primacy to existence. Creation, the physical world, is considered a manifestation or reflection (as in a shadow or image) of its spiritual Creator. The physical universe is like an insubstantial shadow of the actual, substantial Creator. In this worldview, the highest form of cognition, of consciousness, does not occur in the insubstantial, shadowlike physical realm, but in the realm of creation’s spiritual source.

It is the same type of issue faced by Copernicus in the sixteenth century. The earth is no more the centre of the solar system than human cognition or reason is necessarily the centre of knowledge and truth. Just as Copernicus discovered that the earth is not the centre of the universe, so too might human reason be found not to be the primary source of knowledge and truth. This notion is part of the theory of Tsawalk. Human understanding may be part of a larger and greater understanding, the sum of which makes up Qua-ootz, the Nuu-chah-nulth Creator, Owner of Reality. Black Elk, an Oglala Sioux holy man, indicates this in the following account of Crazy Horse’s vision:

Crazy Horse's father was my father's cousin, and there were no chiefs in our family before Crazy Horse; but there were holy men; and he became a chief because of the power he got in a vision when he was a boy. When I was a man, my father told me something about that vision. Of course he did not know all of it; but he said that Crazy Horse dreamed and went into the world where there is nothing but the spirits of all things. That is the real world that is behind this one, and everything we see here is something like a shadow from that world. (Neihardt 1972, 85)

If the empirical reality we perceive is more like a "shadow" of the actual reality of the spiritual dimension, then one assumption of "hard" science is thrown into question. Is there more to existence than that discovered by empirical science? Is it possible that scientific discoveries are not of the first order of existence but of a second order? In Janet Hodgson and Jay Kothare's *Vision Quest: Native Spirituality and the Church in Canada*, Andrew Ahenakew, a contemporary Anglican priest of Cree descent, relates his vision as follows:

"I went to bed, I don't know what time, but I think it must have been about 1 o'clock, 2 o'clock, somewhere around that time. I saw something coming from the river way, from the north. When I looked again I was sitting on the bed. I knew I was sitting on the bed but I guess I was sleeping. That motel seemed to have no walls. This creature came right towards me. He stopped about six feet from me, maybe a little closer, and he looked at me and smiled. A beautiful creature, a creature of God. And he spoke to me. The creature said, 'I have been sent here by the higher power. I'm sent to come and instruct you to make medicine, which will be yours. If I tell you what to do and you listen.' I thought to myself, how can I listen, when I'm a clergyman, to this creature?"

The bear could read his thoughts and told him that even though he did not believe now, he would believe later and would do this big thing. The bear smiled, showing teeth four to five inches long, and continued: "I'm sent here to come and teach you how to make medicine. I'm willing to give my body to be killed so that you can take me and use me for medicine." (Hodgson and Kothare 1990, 120-21)

Andrew Ahenakew was unaware of his physical state. He didn't know whether he was awake or asleep. The subordination of the physical realm to the spiritual realm is indicated by the fact that in this experience the motel appears to have no walls. The walls, so to speak, have dissolved

into the underlying quantum field. Moreover, the bear was not even standing on the floor but stood suspended in mid-air. Human thoughts that are invisible to other humans were visible to this spiritual being. The mission of the bear was to provide information about medicine for human illness. Although Ahenakew, at first, refused to obey the bear for fear of ridicule and expulsion by his superiors, he eventually spent many successful years healing specific illnesses identified by the bear. These kinds of spiritual experiences that manifest empirical results can have implications for the primacy of the spiritual realm over the physical. Moreover, the bear explicitly told Andrew that “when this world was created, all creation was perfect at the beginning of time” (ibid., 129).

Such is also the position of this book. I will consider the place of science and the nature of creation in the light of indigenous origin stories. For example, as a cognition centre the brain is associated with memory activity. However, sources of power external to the human being may also contribute to the process of memory. Black Elk provides one account of this phenomenon in John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*:

It was the pictures I remembered and the words that went with them; for nothing I have ever seen with my eyes was so clear and bright as what my vision showed me; and no words that I have ever heard with my ears were like the words I heard. *I did not have to remember these things; they have remembered themselves all these years.* It was as I grew older that the meanings came clearer and clearer out of the pictures and the words; and even now I know that more was shown to me than I can tell. (Neihardt 1972, 49, emphasis added)

It is usual in human memory experience for events long past to fade, but in this case an old man is speaking of a vision that took place when he was nine. Not only is his memory intact, but the vision's meaning becomes clearer with time. Specific memory recall is not necessarily unusual as people approach the end of life, but what is unusual is the orientation of the memory recall. Black Elk testifies that his recollection of his vision did not depend upon his own cognitive ability but rather had an independent power of its own. The spiritual source of memory of the vision, quite apart from Black Elk's memory, ensured Black Elk's recollection of it. This type of recollection is unusual (Zechmeister and Nyberg 1981; Eysenck 1984; Parkin 1987). A memory that comes from outside human memory banks must remain theoretical. Nevertheless, this example about the extent of memory beyond the empirical domain extends the dialogue about the nature of existence.

Today there is some question about the surety of the foundation upon which Western civilization is built. John Ralston Saul observes that “since the mid-sixties, however, there has been a growing general sense that our systems are not working. Multiple signs of this are easily identified, but they somehow resist fitting into a pattern. The depression. The swollen armaments industry. The breakdown of the legal system ... Random examples from an endless list” (Saul 1993, 21).

Peace, order, and good government as ideals of Western civilization have not been practically realized. In fact, there are local, regional, and global conflicts and environmental devastation to the entire planet, and good government is the exception rather than the rule. People who consider themselves the most advanced and most progressive have brought the earth to its most advanced state of peril. Peace, order, and good government do not characterize present civilization upon earth. Unity, interconnectedness, interrelatedness, and other assumptions about the universe stemming from the theory of Tsawalk suggest that the prevailing assumptions of Western civilization may be incomplete.

What are these Western assumptions? One is that the nature of the universe can be illuminated only by the human mind. This assumption is related to another: that those humans who told tales were unscientific and therefore could have no substantive and reliable knowledge about the nature of existence. Legends, myths, and origin stories belong to a “primitive” phase of human evolution.

But whereas the theory of evolution holds that life evolved from simple to complex, from primitive species to more advanced species, the theory I present in this book holds, in keeping with traditional origin stories, that life did not evolve but began as complexity. Biological activity is not only secondary but also subject to the powers of the more primary processes of the spiritual realm.

That the universe is unified, interconnected, and interrelated are assumptions about both the physical and metaphysical realms found in Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories. In the first four chapters of this book I analyze Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories in an attempt to show how they provide insight into lived experience that simultaneously places human existence in both the physical and metaphysical realms. Chapter 5 examines Nuu-chah-nulth methods of knowledge acquisition – that is, methods of accessing the spiritual realm – as an alternative to scientific methodologies. Chapter 6 discusses traditional ceremonies and practices that complement the meaning of the origin stories and knowledge acquired. In the final chapter I articulate the theory of Tsawalk, which has implications for today. The theory suggests that while the human

mind is necessary for human cognition and for accessing and acquiring information, it can also be a conduit for spiritual information that can complement or complete or further illuminate our understanding of existence.

### **Nuu-chah-nulth Words**

The Nuu-chah-nulth words in this book are spelled roughly according to the Ahousaht accent. Accents can differ considerably among the fourteen Nuu-chah-nulth communities, which can cause confusion about spelling. Various phonetic systems, such as the international phonetic system and others, are not readable without training, and consequently I have avoided using them. The Nuu-chah-nulth words in this book should not be used for study of the language. Note that each chapter employs the Nuu-chah-nulth numbering system. The numbers are translated as follows.

<i>Tsawalk</i>	Chapter 1
<i>Utlá</i>	Chapter 2
<i>Xaats-sta</i>	Chapter 3
<i>Muu</i>	Chapter 4
<i>Suh-tcha</i>	Chapter 5
<i>Nuu-pooh</i>	Chapter 6
<i>Utl-pooh</i>	Chapter 7

Most of the other Nuu-chah-nulth words used in the text are explained. *Oosumich* and *tloo-qua-nah* are used according to my own understanding since my first language is Nuu-chah-nulth. In some cases, the meaning can be inferred from the context. For example, the name Aulth-ma-quus is not interpreted, but the meaning is directly connected to the actual events of the story in which it is found.