

RICHARD ATLEO

## Foreword

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I bring to my present mind the GKS conference in Grainau in February 2014. To begin my contribution to this issue on Indigenous knowledges I sing a chant because it is the ancient Nuu-chah-nulth way of wholeness. I was born into this way, into a traditional house filled with traditional knowledge, which provides a theoretical framework to my presentation. When I came into being, Canada was preoccupied with the WWII in Europe, which meant that my home of Ahousaht, located in an isolated area, without roads, electricity, radio, and other modern conveniences, remained unmolested<sup>1</sup>. Consequently, for the first formative years, my entire outlook on life depended on this ancient way of knowing. This way of life is found within a philosophical framework that is animated by story, known to the outside world as myth.

Son of Raven's quest for the light is one such story. The problem then, as with our own day, was about how to live, which translates into how to access resources for living. What should the first beings do? They needed the light kept in a box by the Chief Wolf that lived across the great waters. First they selected Son of Deer to dance for the Chief Wolf that owned the light, and when this dance-strategy failed they attempted a series of similar tactics to trick the Chief Wolf and take some of the light so that they could live. Then, Wren, the *One Who Speaks Wisdom*, advised Son of Raven to become a tiny, tiny leaf and float in the Chief Wolf's spring well so that when the Chief's daughter came for a drink she would be made to swallow this tiny leaf and Son of Raven would then be born into the Chief Wolf's household. After some time growing up in this household Son of Raven successfully brought home not only the light, but also the box in which the light was kept. This is why Raven to this day can be seen to enjoy the delicacies on any given beach at low tide.<sup>2</sup> This story is so profound and complex that it is never possible to explain its fullness of thought and philosophy during any single presentation. Here is one brief interpretation to this story that parallels my oral presentation to the GKS conference on "Indigenous knowledges and Academic Discourses."

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1 This apt word was used in the Royal Proclamation of 1763, which said in part: "And whereas it is just and reasonable [...] that the several Nations or Tribes of Indians with whom We are connected, and who live under our Protection, should not be molested."

2 Cf. a more comprehensive version of this story in Richard Atleo, *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004. 6-10.

Son of Raven's quest for the light has a simple interpretation at its surface. What is very strange about this story is that further probing into its meaning unveils a paradox that mirrors recent scientific<sup>3</sup> findings. The initial level of analysis of the story parallels the empirical focus on the theory of evolution that is expressed as *survival of the fittest*. This interpretation observes that the strong take by force whatever is wanted, seemingly without regard for law and order. In other words, the notion of *survival of the fittest* suggests that reality is lawless, without purpose, and governed by randomness. This scientific interpretation of reality is the same interpretation made by Son of Raven, which is clearly indicated by the kind of strategies employed to secure the light. These lawless strategies prompted outsiders to call this story "How Son of Raven Stole the Light." However, the strategy suggested by Wren, the *One Who Speaks Wisdom*, is the one that succeeds and it is this feature of the story that begins to unveil a deeper truth.

It is this deeper truth to the story that became the foundation and framework to a Nuu-chah-nulth way of life. It is the reason that ancient Nuu-chah-nulth became a Potlatch people, which is a way of life centered on a *sacred giving* ceremony. The dances and songs of this ceremony are known as *hinkiiits*, a word that describes a *ceremonial process* of giving. Now if the recently imposed title "How Son of Raven Stole the Light" was the only possible truth of the story, then there arises a contradiction. How can a story that seems to celebrate a worldview based on force, deception, trickery, and stealing be taken as the foundation to the *sacred-giving* ways of a Potlatch people? When the story of Son of Raven is examined again to probe for its deeper secrets, there begins to emerge another level of truth. It is provided by the advice given by Wren, the *One Who Speaks Wisdom*, that Son of Raven transform himself into a tiny, tiny leaf and float in the Chief Wolf's spring well. This transformation enables Son of Raven to be born into the family of the Chief Wolf and in so doing he becomes a legal<sup>4</sup> member of the Chief's household. These events unveil a parable that affirms the paradoxical nature of reality that I call polarity. On the surface of things, Son of Raven and the first community of beings observed a reality

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- 3 In my first two books, *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview* (2004) and *Principles of Tsawalk: An Indigenous Approach to Global Crisis* (2011), a Nuu-chah-nulth philosophy and its interpretation into contemporary constitutional terms of respect, consent, recognition, and continuity is presented. The third book, in press, completes the Tsawalk trilogy and is a discourse on the nature of being. Indigenous knowledge cannot be presented in its wholeness without integrating it into other knowledge systems, in precisely the same way that recent scientific advances are now beginning to integrate, first the universe of matter and energy and now a potential universe of consciousness in the study of the autopoietic nature found in the world of atoms and in the world of galaxies. In the Nuu-chah-nulth language this emerging theme of the unity of creation is expressed as *tsawalk* – *everything is one, interconnected and interrelated*.
- 4 Paradox is common to Nuu-chah-nulth storytelling and is accepted as a mystery inherent to reality. The paradox in this instance is the contrast between the *process* of stealing and the *process* of achieving legal-status by being "born again" into the Chief's household, which in the Nuu-chah-nulth language is more commonly expressed as transformation.

that appeared to be fragmented, disconnected, and not interrelated. This appearance of reality logically inferred an evolutionary process of *survival of the fittest* by any means, whether by trickery, deception, or force. On the other hand, the deeper meaning of this story also affirms the apparent contradiction of reality: reality is also governed by natural law where boundaries must be respected in order to access resources and where citizenship by birth provides legal membership. Son of Raven's birth into the household of resources illustrates what is possible.

At this deeper level of analysis, not only does the story indicate natural law<sup>5</sup> but it also indicates *purpose* that is astonishingly intimate and nourishing. This latter conclusion becomes clear when it is realized that Son of Raven was allowed to become a member of the Chief's household. Not in this story, but significantly connected to it, is another name of the Chief, *Kwaa?uuč*, which means *Owner of That Which Is*, or Creator. In other words, because Son of Raven, as a physical being, becomes a family member in the house of the Chief Wolf, a metaphysical being, the apparent divide between the physical and spiritual domains is resolved. This synchrony between the physical and metaphysical is both relational and nourishing. It is at this deeper interpretation of the story of Son of Raven that the vision quest, the process of acquiring knowledge and power, is defined by allegory. Access to the source of light cannot be effectively done by force, deception, or trickery but according to the demands of natural law. The successful strategy employed by Son of Raven to gain access to resources needed for life is the same principle employed by the Nuu-chah-nulth method of the vision quest. Son of Raven, as an archetypal being, finds successful access to the light by assuming an identity of insignificance in the context of an infinite creation. *Insignificance* is a true identity of *being* defined by humility and is a necessary prerequisite for anyone who desires successful access to the source of light.

In summary, the story of Son of Raven is a reflection, in principle, of the relationship between the visible world and invisible world, the empirical domain and spiritual domain, which in modern language is represented by science and religion. It suggests that effective communication and understanding between apparent divides, such as between physical and metaphysical domains, can be facilitated more effectively when beings become aware of their natural identity<sup>6</sup> in the face of an

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5 Paradox is integrated throughout the story of Son of Raven's quest for the light. No separation or dichotomy is assumed about the nature of reality, such as is found in other knowledge systems. The Nuu-chah-nulth worldview represents a different framework that is not either-or but one that accepts the natural tension between creation and destruction, between day and night, between all the apparent contradictions of reality such as stealing and giving. Son of Raven is a being who appears capable of both illegal and legal acts, which is permitted and allowed by Creation.

6 Identity is defined here in the context of Creation and becomes a metaphorical lens through which to perceive Creation in such a way that an inflated sense of identity has the same effect as a distorted lens. In one story, Son of Raven observes Eagle's spectacular fishing-strategy and

infinite existence. The story of Son of Raven indicates that to take what is wanted by force, trickery, and other illegal means is an option; but so too is the higher road of knowing oneself in the context of eternity and infinity and subsequently, by employing the method of vision questing, discovering a natural means to access the necessary resources for living.

Interpretation of the story of Son of Raven is paradoxical and reflects the condition of human activities such as the GKS conference held in Grainau, Germany. The Grainau conference indicates a paradigmatic shift away from colonialism that sought to unify peoples via a hegemonic mind-set, which is otherwise a denial of diversity. The story of Son of Raven in its preservation of the oppositional nature of reality offers the beginning to a workable solution to the recent divide between Indigenous knowledge systems and other knowledge systems. To this present time the world order remains governed by a belief in reality that assumes a philosophy of *survival of the fittest*. The theme of Indigenous knowledges of the Grainau conference may represent part of a growing opposition to this present world order, which includes not only the global environmental movement but also new scientific research in physics and evolutionary biology from which is emerging another interpretation of reality that echoes the interpretation of the story of Son of Raven. Aided and encouraged by scientific advances, Edgar Mitchell, the US astronaut, founded the Noetic Science Institute as a result of his experiences while in space. Studying metaphysical philosophy, the Noetic Science Institute represents one example of a move towards an integration of reality as reflected in the story of Son of Raven. This is one example of the meaning of *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview* (Atleo 2004) where diversity is transformed into an *enrichment of wholeness*, which now requires the kind of encouragement for healthy growth provided by those who attended the GKS conference in Grainau, Germany. These scientific advances, in part, affirm the unity of the physical universe governed by natural law, which, when complemented and supported by Indigenous knowledge, can include the potential of an intimate, nourishing relationship with the source of light.

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when he copies Eagle's strategy he effectively inflates his own identity and thereby distorts his perception, which guarantees his failure.

