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(Last year I had the good fortune of landing a job as a consulting anthropologist for a pair of Canadian Cree Indians filming a documentary about traversing—on foot— the entire Royal Inca Road, a pre-historic engineering marvel stretching from Quito, Ecuador to Santiago, Chile—well over 3,000 miles. The Cree's novel conceit was to explore aboriginal attitudes towards, and beliefs about, the earth in hopes that these might have modern applications for conservation and sustainability. My job, among many other tasks, was to provide context for the project. The challenge, for a rational empiricist—me—was to explain belief systems and the evolution of religion without offending believers or *pulling my punches. Ideally, I wanted to propose a paradigm everyone could enthusiastically embrace. What follows was my effort. Did I succeed? You be the judge.)*

PACHACUTI'S REVENGE

by Robert H. Miller

Is Andean epistemology the new hula-hoop?

In 2001 Alejandro Toledo legitimately became the first Native American head of state in the Andes since Huascar Inca was murdered by his half-brother, Atahualpa, in 1532. The Stanford-trained economist proved honest and competent. By continuing the sound economic policies instituted under the previous Fujimori regime, he provided Peru with high growth and low inflation. However, for some unknown reason—perhaps his lack of personal pizzazz—he was dismally unpopular and declined to run again.

The 2006 elections pitted Ollanta Humala, another Native American—this time of a leftist, populist bent—against Alan Garcia, a disastrous ex-president, previously ideologically indistinguishable from his opponent but recently converted to liberal, free-market policies. Garcia narrowly defeated Humala and, against all expectations, stuck to his promises. For 2009, *The Economist* predicted Peruvian economic growth to be the third highest in the world after China and India. Since Garcia cannot succeed himself in the 2011 elections and Humala is gearing up for another run, Peruvians are worried. But for now, anyway, economics has trumped ethnicity.

In next-door Bolivia, Juan Evo Morales, an Aymara Indian and head of the indigenous coca growers union, was elected president in 2006. Morales never finished high school. To date, his rule has been marked by incompetence, confrontation, expropriation, power grabs, and the near rendering of the republic. Local councils, little more than mobs, bypass the courts and mete out burning, gasoline-filled tire-collar justice. Yet he remains popular—just.

The Inca heartland is in the throes of a native revival. Though Ecuador hasn't yet elected a native head of state, the Indians have gone on the warpath. In 2000, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, in alliance with junior military officers, overthrew President Jamil Mahaud and formed a new political party named after Pachacuti Inca Yupanqui (1438-1471) tenth emperor of the Inca Empire. Pachacuti is still revered as pre-Columbian America's most accomplished leader, combining the military prowess of Alexander the Great with the sagacity of Roman Emperor Justinian.

Tahuantinsuyu, as the Inca Empire called itself, did not go gently into that good night. Though Francisco Pizarro's band seemed to make quick work of the conquest, mostly through luck, disease and the confusion of the Inca civil war of succession, serious resistance to the new order continued for nearly 250 more years. The last Inca rebellion, led by Tupac Amaru, culminated in the siege of Cusco in 1781 and the execution of the last Inca pretender. Ironically, the only first-hand account of the Spanish conquest and its initial aftermath was written by an Inca lord, Titu Cusi Yupanqui, and is still in print.

Native Andean resurgence has not been limited to politics or, for that matter, to South America. Over the past 20 years a quiet and low-key enthusiasm for Andean epistemology has burgeoned in Europe, North America and South Africa gaining prominence through the teachings of the Cusco school and elaborated by Americo Yabar, a paqo (or, loosely, a mystic-cum-management consultant); the writings of Joan Wilcox and Diane Dunn, now a paqo herself; anthropologists Inge Bolin and Catherine J. Allen; and Oakley Gordon, a psychologist who has tried to reconcile Yabar's teachings with non-Andean epistemologies. Not that, from a certain perspective, there is any conflict—after all, if "Western" epistemology can accommodate Chaos Theory and Post-modernist Deconstructionism, it is truly an all-inclusive tent.

Epistemology?!

Nothing induces instant boredom in a reader more acutely than a word like *epistemology* in the title or first sentence of a casual read. And well it might. It's not an easy concept to grasp and is at least one or two categories of abstraction away from concrete reality. Epistemology is not what most people would consider fun or relaxing—like, say, Canadian politics or Chinese opera.

Webster's Third New International Dictionary eye-glazingly defines it as "the study of knowledge systems", or "the theory of knowledge". Oakley Gordon elaborates (and I paraphrase slightly), that it not only encompasses the formal fields of science, philosophy (of which it is also a sub-category) and religion, but also "patterns of assumptions, beliefs and behaviors" that are tacit, subconscious or otherwise unexamined. Simply put, *epistemology* is the study of *how* we know *what* we know.

The word is cobbled together by academics from the Greek "episteme" (knowledge) and "ology" (study of) because they had no run-of-the-mill word at hand to describe the convoluted concept they'd come up with. So they coined a new word modeled on words like ge-ology (study of earth), bi-ology (study of life), phil-ology (study of words), psych-ology (study of the mind) and many other words ending in "ology".

What makes *epistemology* so much more difficult to grasp is that *epistemology* is *twice* as abstract as these other "ologys". Whereas most "ology" words are the study of the concrete things that precede them, epistemology is the study *of those studies*; in other words, the *how's* and *why's* of what we know.

But epistemology can attain an even more rarefied abstract level. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, it is also "the study of the *validity* of knowledge". So judgments can—and often are—part of this philosophical endeavor.

Hector Sizes Me Up

On our first trip together down to the Andes one of my employers, Wendy—a Canadian First Nations Cree—introduced me to Hector, a Peruvian labor organizer who had spent 13 years in a Peruvian prison during the Fujimori and Toledo regimes. While there, he had dedicated his time to studying the Inca road system, over 15,000 miles in its entirety (including the Royal Road, its main trunk). It has recently been described as the Inca's "dialogue with the land". Wendy characterized Hector as having "the sort of knowledge that can't be put into a book".

Well, to a professional writer and dyed-in-the-wool rational empiricist, that phrase bristled my neck hairs and set my BS antennae quivering apoplectically. I couldn't wait to engage this sage of the unwritten.

When I first met Hector I was struck by his modesty and transparency. Figuring that full disclosure was the best strategy for establishing rapport, I leveled with him about what Wendy had told me. Hector looked at me thoughtfully and, after a minute's reflection, said that he could size up a person's character within minutes of meeting him/her—*and that that sort of knowledge he could not convey in writing*.

He had a point.

Still, though it might take thousands of words to describe the process one goes through when he sizes up someone, it can be done. Malcolm Gladwell did it in his book, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, 2007. And the skill is not uncommon. Recent research by Jefferson Duarte of Rice University suggests that one of a person's most telling moral features, his creditworthiness, can be seen in his face—as well as his sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, teaching ability and personality—often after only half a minute's exposure to even a years' old photograph.

On the other hand, effectively teaching the art of successful snap judgments is much more difficult. But I digress. What Hector's lesson drove home is that well-honed intuition is not fundamentally in conflict with rational empiricism; both are ways of grasping and understanding the world around us—both are the proper study of epistemology.

Not too unrelated is kinesthetic knowledge, or physical, as opposed to intellectual knowledge. Remember learning to ride a bike or play a musical instrument? No matter how long you leave it, your torso, fingers and lips never lose that knowledge.

Timothy Leary, the late guru of LSD, and Carlos Castaneda, author of *The Teachings of Don Juan: A Yaqui Way of Knowledge* expand epistemology's territory even further—much further. They argue that the judicious use of psychotropic drugs yields an entirely different understanding of, and approach to, reality. Psychoactive drugs have the unusual effect of suspending the perception of time. To the user, past and future disappear and all reality is concentrated into the here-and-now. This extraordinary sensation intensifies events experienced during the "trip" and never fails to alter the user's perception of reality.

But Back to Chinese Opera

Have you ever read a poem or listened to a piece of music and had one of those "aha!" moments when a light bulb goes off in your mind and suddenly your understanding changes? Art, literature—even music—are media that help shape our view of reality. So then, these too are also the proper territory of epistemology: the study of how those transcendental endeavors create new insights. Problem is, one man's Chinese opera is another's cat-scratching-on-a-blackboard. Why the difference?

Different people, brought up in different cultures and traditions, respond differently to different sensory stimuli. Exactly why this might be is not only the subject of anthropology and psychology but also, ultimately, of epistemology. Language is a case in point.

Benjamin Whorf, in *Language, Thought & Reality*, argues that since much of our conscious thought is in the language(s) we speak, its conventions affect our perception and interpretation of reality. English grammar with its built-in verb tenses inadvertently forces us to think in terms of past, present and future. Mandarin Chinese, on the other hand, has no tenses—a Chinese speaker must consciously include a reference to time if he wants to convey tense. Perhaps that's why Chinese has such an aphoristic inscrutability.

Quechua grammar, like many indigenous American languages, has a unique construct that would benefit Anglo-Saxon jurisprudence and science no end: referential reliability. This requires the speaker to attach suffixes that clarify his relationship to the data being conveyed. While English has three basic tenses—past, present and future—built into its verbs, Quechua has three levels of validation built into its verbs.

When the content of a sentence was directly experienced by the speaker, he uses the first level of reliability indicator—called a witness validator suffix. When conveying information learned secondhand, the speaker uses the hearsay validator suffix. Finally, when speculating without evidence, or when uncertain, the speaker employs the conjectural validator, indicating that the reliability of the information is a complete crapshoot.

How might this structure affect a Quechua speaker's perception of reality? How does it affect his social relationships and what he *knows* about people? Does our English grammatical structure with its tenses make us particularly vulnerable to the way psychedelic drugs stop time? Epistemology seeks to answer this and many other even more subtle relationships between the world, our senses and our minds.

Have we lost our minds?

Just how does one actually *do* epistemology? Is it anything like *doing* biology or geology? Let's take a (short) look at recent epistemological investigations into the nature of consciousness.

Ever since Sigmund Freud first tried to figure out how our minds work, philosophers, biologists, social scientists and every sort of investigator of the human condition has been clawing away at that black box and, more importantly, at one of its central underlying assumptions, what is known as the mind/body problem: What is *mind* and how does it emerge from physical and chemical processes?

The investigations have yielded few answers but have shed much light on the nature of the problem. On the one hand, diehard advocates of mind still harbor faith in the existence of a "thing" that is mind and attribute our failure to unlock its secrets to not enough hard work. At the other extreme are those who have thrown up their hands in frustration, declared that we've done all possible research, still not found "mind", and that, therefore, "mind" does not exist.

Into this quagmire jumped some researchers who decided that perhaps part of the problem lay in how we approached the problem. Traditional Victorian scientific investigative techniques approached a complex problem by parsing its many parts, analyzing each one separately, gaining individual insights and then summing the parts in order to understand the whole—a very productive methodology in most instances. However, in some cases, results were a bit like the Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant: the particulars didn't add up to the sum of the whole.

These investigators decided that perhaps it might be better *not* to parse certain phenomena into its parts but rather to investigate complex entities—such as sentient beings—as a whole. That, perhaps, in order to understand the nature of sentient beings, these shouldn't be approached as mind/body dualities but ought rather be approached as a single entity—a monistic approach. Ironically, this "new" approach mimics "primitive" animistic philosophies where the interrelationship of everything was impossible to separate.

In the spirit of this new approach, Professor Frank R. Zindler, both a biologist and linguist, late of the State University of New York, and others decided to take a fresh look at "mind". They realized that through purely historical accident the word mind, in all European languages, is grammatically a noun. Because of our grammar and the hidden assumptions of our language, we tend to think of nouns as substantive "things" such as tree, table, brick, etc. in spite of many nouns being quite insubstantial, e.g. truth, beauty, velocity, etc.

Zindler realized that because mind was a noun, it was conceived to be a thing. Because it was thought to be a thing, it was thought to have existence apart from the brain. Neurobiological studies offer no supporting evidence for these ideas. Rather, mind is better perceived as a process, a dynamic relation, and not a thing. If we change the processes of the brain, we change the mind. If nothing else, psychedelic drugs have taught us that fact.

For perspective Zindler posits that to wonder what happens to the mind after the brain decays is as silly as asking where the 70-miles-per-hour have gone after a speeding auto has crashed into a tree.

"Now that scientists recognize mind as a process rather than a thing, they are making rapid advances in understanding the specific brain dynamics that correspond to the various subjective states collectively known as mind", concludes Zingler.

Foremost among these advances is the discovery (at Goldsmith's College, London and the University of Houston) that the previously referred to "aha!"

moments of insight are detectable with an electroencephalograph up to eight seconds before an individual's mind is aware of them. More startling, Dr. Allen Snyder at the University of Sydney has been able to induce savant skills through repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation. Clearly, epistemology *is* useful.

John Dewey, at the turn of the 19th century, was one of the first Western philosophers to minimize the mind/body duality. He argued that philosophers' obsession on creating a problem of the relation between the mind and the world was a mistake. He retorted that no one had ever made a problem about the relation between, for example, the *hand* and the world. As Louis Menand puts it in *The Metaphysical Club*, "The function of the hand is to help the organism cope with the environment; in situations in which a hand doesn't work, we try something else, such as a foot, or a fishhook, or an editorial…They just use a hand where a hand will do. Dewey thought that ideas and beliefs are the same as hands: instruments for coping. An idea has no greater metaphysical stature than, say, a fork. When your fork proves inadequate to the task of eating soup, it makes little sense to argue about whether there is something inherent in the nature of forks…or soup that accounts for the failure. You just reach for a spoon."

Pachacuti vs. Plato

With modern man facing a slew of problems ranging from overpopulation, pollution and global warming to the present economic/fiscal crises, many people are questioning our approach to, and use of, knowledge. This analysis has resulted in the recognition of a distinct "Western" epistemology as opposed to epistemologies that developed outside the modern tradition—epistemologies that bear examination in hopes that these might be mined for some nuggets of wisdom.

Western, or modern, epistemology has its roots in a movement that emerged independently throughout centers of high culture all across the Old World in the first millennium B.C. Robert N. Bellah, an anthropologist, has characterized it as "an extremely negative evaluation of man and society and the exaltation of another realm of reality as alone true and infinitely valuable". This dualistic perception emerged in Greece with Plato's classic formulation of a realm of the ideal that mirrors mundane reality; in Israel with the conception of a transcendent god in whom alone there is any comfort; in India with the Buddha as the only refuge from a world of chaos; in China with the Taoist admonition of withdrawal from human society.

Later on, it is hardly necessary to quote Revelations or Augustine for comparable Christian sentiments; while the Koran stresses that the life to come is infinitely superior (virgins or no virgins) to present reality. Even in Japan, usually so innocently world accepting, Shotoku Taishi declared that the world is a lie and only the Buddha is true, and in the Kamakura period the conviction that the world is hell led to orgies of religious suicide by seekers after paradise.

This world rejection zeitgeist is unlike anything that came before or after.

Prior to this radical shift in perception, epistemology was more concerned with the maintenance of personal, social and cosmic harmony and with attaining specific goods—rain, harvest, children, health—as men have always been. Salvation in an after-life was virtually absent; the intellectual focus was on getting along with the natural forces that ruled existence—the sun, the earth, water, wind, thunder, fertility, game, plants, etc—in a word, *animism*.

Animism is a holistic approach that reveres natural phenomena without separating the whole into constituent parts—vital essences, soul, energy, their physical manifestations or their sub-systems—while still including them. It is a monistic perception as opposed to the later revolution's dualism. Animism seeks integration while world rejection seeks transcendence.

The revolution that took place around 1,000 BC, by creating a schism between the real world and an ideal reality, started an intellectual movement that helped humankind look at their world differently. If reality could be broken down into its constituent parts—real and ideal—couldn't everything else? Might there be more than two parts? Now that natural phenomena could be parsed into building blocks, these became much easier to analyze, understand and, ultimately control. It was the first step towards a philosophical reductionism that later culminated in Victorian science.

With the existence of an ideal world posited, comparative analyses between the real and ideal worlds also led to the possibility of reform on this earth—of the self, society, government, technology, etc. There was nothing that couldn't bear some improvement. Even the ability to separate itself became a tool of reform. Power could be split into political-military and cultural-religious, as could social classes and economic specialties. Doubtlessly, this new paradigm greatly aided mankind's adaptation to growing population pressures worldwide by facilitating technological innovation.

Still, the revolution was not very democratic. Control was still vested in authority: church and state. It took yet another revolution another 2,000 years later (more or less) for epistemology to undergo as radical a change as it previously had with world rejection—the Protestant Reformation.

The Protestant Reformation made man's relationship with—and understanding of—reality, much more democratic. Prior to the Reformation only the religious elite had access to God's revelation, the bible. They, in turn, interpreted God's word for the rest of society. In most European countries it was actually a crime to own a bible.

The second revolution that the Protestant Reformation wrought was simple: that everyone had the right to own, read and interpret God's word for himself. This principle of individual autonomy and the devolution of ultimate authority spread to governmental and economic realms where it presaged the end of monarchy and the rise of capitalism. In the meta-sphere of epistemology, it was the beginning of the end for the earlier, world rejection, revolution. Epistemology diversified. It was an age of enlightenment—in science, philosophy and even religious thought, where hundreds of new sects flowered.

Jerusalem, Rome, Mecca, Cusco

Whatever its benefits, the Protestant Reformation had little effect on the divide-and-conquer dualistic-reductionist approach that was still yielding so many insights. If anything, Victorian scientists were predicting mankind's imminent omniscience. By first identifying the constituent parts of whatever was being studied (dualism), investigators could more easily analyze each part individually and finally re-assemble the lot into a complete explanation (reductionism).

However, there was a problem. With time, the dualistic-reductionist approach proved inadequate when faced with highly complex, integrated systems such as climate, eco-systems, economies and living organisms. A new, more holistic approach was necessary because understanding constituent parts didn't fully explain the whole.

Philosopher and ecologist Robert Ulanowicz said that science must develop techniques to study ways in which larger scales of organization influence smaller ones, and also ways in which feedback loops create structure at a given level, independently of details at a lower level of organization. In an attempt to reconcile this difficulty, James Lovelock, an exo-biologist for NASA, postulated the Gaia Hypothesis, named after the Greek goddess of Earth.

The Gaia Hypothesis proposes that the biosphere and physical components of the earth—atmosphere, cryosphere, hydrosphere and lithosphere—are closely integrated to form a complex interacting system that maintains the climatic and biogeochemical conditions on Earth in a preferred homeostasis.

Today we are in the throes of a new revolution. If a more holistic approach has been productive in studying the mind, perhaps other fields of inquiry might also benefit from a less dualistic-reductionist approach. The door was opened for a re-evaluation of the animistic approach.

A New Age (literally) dawned. The democratization of religious belief, initiated so violently during the Reformation, flowered into a thousand blooms. Now that each person could find his own road to enlightenment, people scoured the world for alternative spiritual approaches, particularly holistic, natural phenomena-centered (as opposed to world rejecting) beliefs.

In popular culture, that search probably began with the Beatles' discovery and popularization of Transcendental Meditation as practiced by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. Though world-renouncing in its transcendentalism, it did not renounce worldly involvement or pleasures.

More recently, the search for a new approach has focused on indigenous American animist epistemologies, particularly Andean epistemologies, not only because of their geographical isolation from world rejection creeds but also because of the sophistication and success of Inca civilization—a civilization that absorbed virtually its entire known world, maintained a burgeoning population more-or-less peacefully and without famine; and displayed a reverence for their environment that attracts many today.

A formicable society

If nothing else, anthropological theory has taught us that increasing population density begets technological innovation in a continuous feed-back loop but is always associated with increased governmental power, regimentation and social stratification.

Inca society was the antithesis of a liberal ideal. Tax freedom day didn't fall until September—in most years; subjects worked for state and church two-thirds of the year. Even when too old, poor or incapacitated to pay, individuals had to at least pay their tribute in *lice*—to maintain the integrity and fairness of the system. There was no private property beyond one's clothing, tools, guinea pigs and such. Trade was not allowed. Nuclear family autarky was the rule and the economy was rigidly centrally planned. Beyond the first-born, a family's children were at the disposal of the emperor and were sometimes subject to human sacrifice. Inca and subject populations were resettled at the whim of the emperor to discourage revolt. Inca society was the human equivalent of a bee or ant colony.

Still, it had its attractions. Tahuantinsuyu was the first successful, corruption-free welfare state in the world. No one starved, lacked a home or suffered arbitrary injustice at the hands of local administrators. Corvee labor kept state granaries full to supply the army and areas hit with failed harvests. A sophisticated network of spies and informants provided instant polling to the Inca. Local chiefs and administrators guilty of malfeasance suffered swift punishment. Food supplies, information, justice and armies moved between what is today Colombia and southern Chile along a road system that rivaled the Roman Empire's. And it was fast. Trained relay runners with sophisticated mnemonic devices could cover 140 miles in one day and could go from Quito to Cusco in 7 days. (For comparison, the US Pony Express could cover 250 miles per day, or about 10 days from the Atlantic to the Pacific.) Giant llama caravans carried supplies and the armies' kit over the paved, bridged and accommodation-replete

Royal Roads. And medical care was free with Inca cranial surgery being second to none.

Best of all, Inca rule created peace. The *Pax Incaica* was achieved with a minimum of bloodshed. Inca ambassadors would regale prospective conquests with the benefits of Inca rule while massive Inca armies camped outside the walls of the target city. Generous bribes were offered both to the chiefs—who would retain their positions if accommodating—and the populace. Siege tactics could last for years but were always punctuated with truces during planting and harvest. But ultimately, if the peaceful incentives failed, Inca armies were known to inflict hideous torture and annihilate entire male populations.

The Cusco Creed

Inca theology reflected the sophistication of such an advanced civilization. Like the Romans, the Incas allowed their subjects religious freedom but required a few minimal doctrinal concessions. During his reign, Pachacuti convened the Council of Curicancha which, like the Council of Nicaea, set out to standardize doctrine and integrate all the beliefs of the newly conquered trans-Andean subjects with Inca theology. Pachacuti started by recognizing 3 contradictions in traditional simple sun worship:

1. Inti—the Sun—cannot be universal if, while giving light to some, withholds it from others.

2. Inti cannot be perfect if he can never remain at ease, resting.

3. Nor can he be all-powerful when the smallest cloud may cover his face.

Therefore, the Council of Curicancha postulated the existence of Viracocha, an all-powerful, creator meta-deity that it imposed on all Inca subjects. Viracocha was more-or-less simply grafted onto what was becoming an extremely complex doctrinal edifice while not conflicting with minor, local deities and still keeping Inti.

Not only was Andean animism suddenly flirting with monotheism, its theological subtleties and elaborations—too numerous and esoteric to describe here, but including much practical wisdom in addition to abstruse arcana—were becoming every bit as mysterious and complex as the Christian creeds of transubstantiation and the trinity. And instead of rejecting the world, Inca religion embraced and revered it. Alongside the more traditional (at least from a Judeo-Christian-Muslim perspective)—and challenging—coming-of-age ceremonies, fasts and trials of endurance, there were feasts, sex, drugs (Ayahuasca), alcohol and music. Faith, commitment *and* pleasure were celebrated.

An important part of Andean animism is its self-help aspect. Practical nuggets of wisdom that promote character, conviviality and satisfaction—akin to combining the teachings of Dale Carnegie, Stephen Covey and Deepak Chopra with the Bible—are intrinsically intertwined as part of its canonics.

Heady stuff.

But probably Andean epistemology's biggest draw today is its reverence for Pachamama, mother earth, and her myriad natural constituents—soil, water, wind, plants, animals and even rocks. In today's enlightenment-seeking, ecology-conscious, hedonistic modern world Andean epistemology seeks to provide a holistic balance—in living with oneself, society and the earth.

Animism vs. atheism? Hector weighs in

One evening after dinner Wendy sought Hector's advice on a matter that had been troubling her. She asked me to translate.

She recounted that the Inca Road Project, to her great surprise, had not been well received by certain members of her Cree Band. In fact, she'd been attacked by a shaman who tried to impale her between the shoulder blades with a porcupine quill. At the last moment her husband deflected the thrust. Still, the medicine man succeeded in casting his spell. Ever since, Wendy had been troubled by headaches, chest pains and neurasthenia. Could Hector recommend an Andean shaman that might lift the spell?

By this time I was internally cringing and questioning my involvement with such people and this project. I braced myself for Hector's response.

Hector looked at both of us thoughtfully and, after some moments' reflection, said that Wendy had undertaken a big project with tremendous responsibility that generated a lot of envy and jealousy amongst a close-knit clan in an Indian reservation setting. She was no doubt stressed out and weary. Hector suggested rest, a positive attitude and forging ahead with a clear conscience. When Wendy insisted on a referral to a medicine man Hector recommended a more conventional doctor.

The contrast struck me. Wendy, a modern Canadian in every sense, had been raised in a fundamentalist Christian home by alcoholic, sometimes abusive, parents. She had discovered her tribe's animist Cree beliefs as an adult, and had embraced them—in my opinion—in a New Age-ish sort of way as a reaction to the hypocrisy that had been forced upon her as a child. The dream catchers, medicine wheels, frequent allusions to Indian beliefs and other paraphernalia that was now a part of her seemed necessary reinforcements for a new-found faith.

Hector, on the other hand, had been raised in an Andean animist milieu that subtly permeated his practical character—his animism wasn't a compensatory reaction. Their different approaches got me to thinking about my own epistemological evolution.

* * *

Humankind's oldest and most widely held religious beliefs are animism and ancestor worship—both almost always found together (a linkage that begs to be investigated)—and both labeled a bit too glibly by condescending observers with a monotheistic background, little regard for translation difficulties and, therefore, scant appreciation for the depth, complexity or subtlety of alien beliefs.

Animism literally refers to a belief that everything—living or inanimate—has an essence: a soul, or *anima*, if you will; and that soul need not be a spirit or ghost-like being with a potentially independent existence. Animism usually regards human beings as on a roughly equal footing with other animals, plants, natural forces and even objects—all deserving respect. Humans are considered a part of nature, not superior or separate from it. However, it is not a type of religion in itself but rather a constituent belief or virtue—analogous to polytheism, monotheism or even filial piety—that is found in many belief systems.

In the Aristotelian version of animism all things are composed of matter and form—the essence—the latter being the defining characteristic and corresponding to a 'soul', albeit one that is neither immortal nor deserving of any sort of worship. It was merely an expedient he proposed to account for things such as butterflies whose 'matter' undergoes such radical transformations during its life cycle but whose 'form' ostensibly remains a butterfly. It was this original Aristotelian concept that was appropriated and greatly elaborated by the early Christian church into the modern "soul" most of us are familiar with.

Likewise, ancestor worship is not a religion but rather a practice, one that is a part of nearly all religious traditions. And it is better rendered as 'ancestor veneration', a more accurate description of what practitioners actually do, which is to cultivate kinship values such as filial piety, family loyalty and family continuity, often with rituals such as visiting graves, offering flowers and grave decorations, burning candles or incense, reciting genealogies, or simply displaying photographs in special locations. Prayer, actual worship, belief in the transformation of dead relatives into deities or communication with them may or may not be present.

* * *

Sometimes, when pressed for my religious beliefs, I'll respond—as a heuristic device with a less polarizing tendency than atheist—that I'm an adherent of reformed ancestor worship/animism. In other words, I venerate the DNA line which I now represent; and my habits are respectful and frugal—of life and the things which support it. Is there a conflict between these values and atheism? I don't think so. What do you think?

(The Great Recession put the Royal Inca Road Project on hold indefinitely. Wendy and Laurie, the Cree principals behind the project, waged a (so far) loosing battle to maintain adequate funding from corporate and government donors while holding on to full-time jobs. But their efforts continue. Today they live in Stavager, Norway where Laurie works as a pilot for a subsidiary of SAS airlines and Wendy manages a branch of Statoil's (the Norwegian oil company) international office for indigenous affairs, a position that will allow her to further pursue their quest.)