

## An Alaska Native's Theory on Events Leading To Loss of Spiritual Life

**QUESTION: Why do the Native American/Alaska Native people think in terms of cycles and circles? What caused the circle to break in the last one hundred plus years?**

The tools of mathematics have given us some ideas about patterns and forms as well as abstract and esoteric formulae that leave most of us confused and questioning the use of such illusionary magic tricks. For example, when will the hunter need to know the exact distance across a river using trigonometric functions? But, we agree with a lot of mathematical and scientific theories and ideas, such as the shortest distance between two points is a straight line; that a circle is a line that keeps falling in toward the center; that the radii are equidistant, that the circle has no beginning and no end; the quantum and relativity theories and so forth. These are commonsensical ideas that indigenous people can readily subscribe to.

To the Native people there are many things in this universe that are cyclical and go in a circle. Examples of these include the seasons, the solar system, the Native timepiece of the Big Dipper going around the North Star, the atom, The raven's path across the sky visible at certain times (part of the Milky Way spiral), an eddy in the river, a whirlwind, and many other examples. In each instance there is a drawing force in the center. In the Native worldview, we can think of this as the circle of life. In each Native person's life the central drawing force is the self (Fig. 1). Down through many thousands of years, this is what kept the individual in balance. The energy (self) kept the values, attitudes, and traditions from being flung out. It allowed the Native individual to be constantly in communications with self, others, Nature and the spirits to check on the propriety of existing characteristics of life. Many of the values have remained the same and are very applicable today.

With infringements of new people from other parts of the world, came a weakening of the self with all its strengths of what to be and how to live. At first the circle remained strong.

Figure 1.

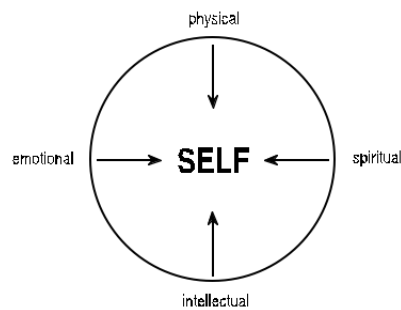
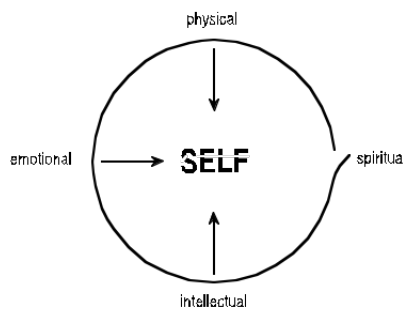


Figure 2.



However, with the encroachment of missionaries from various Christian religions, traders, trappers, miners, and explorers came diseases unknown to the Native people. Following this came a calamity surmounting any experience that the Native people have ever had. Many elders, shamans, parents, community members, and children died as a result of these superior diseases. With the loss of so many people, especially the shamans who until this time were the healers, left the Native people questioning their own spirituality. Was it really the devil and his evil allies that the Native people subscribed to and believed in? A crushing blow to a people who had direct access and communications with the natural and spiritual worlds through their shamans. The first rent to the circle was in the spiritual realm (Fig. 2), and we have been suffering from a spiritual depression ever since. The Alaska Native spirituality can in no way be replaced by orthodox Christian religions, Eastern or other ways of knowing about a spiritual life.

Where the break occurs, one side of the line straightens out becoming more linear. Through this break leaks in new ideas, values, and ways of life that cause much doubt about their own world and beliefs. A maelstrom of values, beliefs and traditions results causing a confusion of what to be and what to do. The sense of self becomes weakened, thus its drawing force is debilitated causing some original and traditional ideas of life to be lost. The turmoil like that of a tornado continues. The amalgamation of Western and

other cultures from throughout the world are completely mixed with Native traditions. The Alaska Native people did not readily accept modern education and religions. There was resistance, and if conditions had been different the Alaska Native people could have controlled what was allowed into their worldview. But, such was not the case. The encroachment of various peoples and their cultures overwhelmed the Native people. Not only did they come with new ideas, but with new species of dogs, plants, domesticated animals, bacteria, viruses. This not only caused turmoil in the human beings but also caused ecological havoc. Their new technological tools, hunting, trapping, and fishing devices along with the need to make money to buy these “needed” brought down sacred ideas of harmony in many Native people. All four quarters were assaulted at they same time, but they did not all break at the same time. I think, with the records of diseases, they occurred more in line with what I am presenting here.

The next, I think, was at the emotional realm (Fig. 3). Not feeling good about themselves because of the message being told them by the missionaries, teachers, miners, trappers, traders, Federal agents, and so forth. They were told in no uncertain terms that their languages and cultures were primitive and had no place in the Western or modern world. The educational system was established to dissipate and destroy their languages, spirituality and cultures. The barrage came in many forms from institutions of the colonial hegemonic force. The once proud hunter/provider and successful homemaker now felt little worth living for in their ravaged world. There was nothing really good left to allow them to feel good about themselves, or self-governing or self-reliant. Only despair is left.

Figure 3.

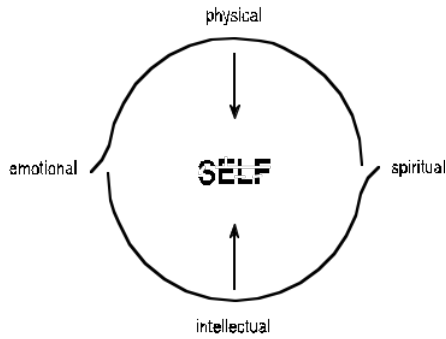
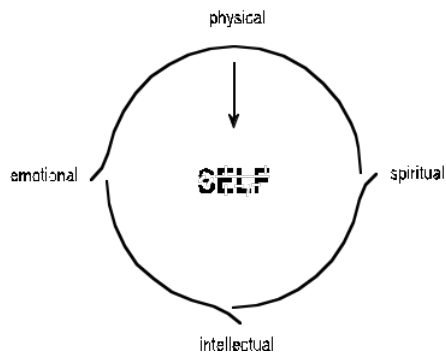


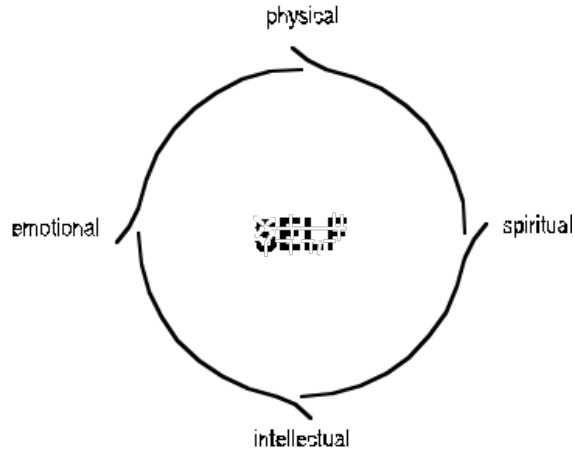
Figure 4.



The intellectual arena was the next rupture in this circle (Fig. 4). Rationality and empiricism coupled with intuition had been the Native peoples' forte. Nature was their metaphysic and thus lived in reality. They had successfully devised their worldview to allow them to live in reality with all its concomitant coping tools and skills. Now with their spirituality and emotions on a downward spiral, the people became intellectually dysfunctional. They became docile and robotlike, expecting everything to be done for them. Their clear consciousness or awareness was now viewed through a stigmatized and scarred corneal lens (worldview). Things were unclear and confusion followed.

The last fissure occurred in the physical whereby the Native people in their demoralized state became susceptible to diseases such as tuberculosis, influenza, cancer, and many psychosocial maladies (Fig. 5). The foundations upon which a whole person was produced by the culture was now broken asunder, and a new fragmented culture, a mix of many cultures represented by newcomers, produced fragmented Native youngsters susceptible to new ideas, diseases and yearnings.

Figure 5.



The ruptures allowed some aspects of these characteristics to flow out or become modified while allowing new ideas, ways of being, thinking, behaving and doing to seep in. This has caused much confusion among the Native people.

The Native way of sciencing has always been, at least, three-dimensional to include the human, natural and spiritual worlds. This was a conscious effort to keep in balance. Everything on earth, including earth, was endowed with a spirit, therefore life. And because of this spirit or energy from the Spirit of the Universe, the Native people must do things in such a way that no harm nor disrespect happen to life on earth. It then required that the Native people come up with elaborate rituals and ceremonies to pay homage to all, to maintain or regain balance in one's life or that of the community. They had transcended the need for quantifying and establishing laws of Nature. They must have realized that these would become prisons of the mind and lead to a life that is one-dimensional.

All the schools' curricula in all disciplines are one-dimensional because they are linear. The vaunted mathematical and scientific tools and their off-spring the technologies, are one-dimensional. These tools have the wonderful capacity for new discoveries in other worlds but because of the Western need to learn to control Nature they lead to confusion and a feeling of being weaned from the life force and its inherit relationships. They are bereft of the values extant in the indigenous societies which open doors for new world discoveries. Western mathematics, sciences and technologies do have values, however, they are proscribed to ambition to learn in depth and greed to use this knowledge for gain. This is the foremost senseless and meaningless ambition leading to disintegration of the human experience. The more we know, the less we know about life. Which says to me that Western mathematics, sciences and technologies have merely been superficial

never getting to the meat of things. What has been missing from the great potential of these and all other disciplines?

It has been said that “Nature abhors a vacuum”. Could it also be said that Nature abhors a monocivilization? One way of being, thinking, behaving and doing? From all indications, Nature thrives on diversity. Look at the permutations of weather during a day much less a month, or year. The climates differ from one part of the earth to another. The flora and the fauna differ from one region to another. The continents and their geography differ. No two snowflakes are exactly alike. The stars, constellations, and other heavenly bodies seem to be unchanging, yet our advanced astronomers tell us that many changes are taking place. According to them, novae, supernovae, black holes, stars dying and being born, and so forth, are happening in the universe. The new sciences of chaos and complexity show us diversity of patterns we never thought existed in Nature. These all point to diversity and this is what makes Nature thrive. The Alaska Native people knew this and strove for harmony with all of life.

The Alaska Native people have come full circle. “Seggangukut”, we are awakening, we are being energized, is what the Yup’ik word means. They have Nature as their metaphysic and have drawn energy from earth whereby things traditionally were often quite clear and thus could be attended to or a resolution reached. The one thing that has often been spoken of by Native people who are ill is that of being visited by various people from the community to show care and love for the ill person. They have expressed the feeling that some people will cause the person to feel worse while another person will make the person stronger and clearer of mind. It is said that in the former case, a person who does not have the right mind or balance in life will draw energy from the ill person thereby making the ill person worse than before the visit. On the other, there will come a person who is kind, upright and is with a mind of making you better. Instead of drawing energy from the ill person, this person shares some of his/her energy with the sick person. The ailing one feels better.

Another is the story of a man out on the ocean. He gets caught on an iceberg that gets cut off from shore and drifts out. He has no choice but to try to keep warm and survive the night. The next day, he finds that the iceberg is stationary but is not attached to the shore ice. New ice has formed overnight in the water between. He remembers the advice of his elders that to test the newly formed ice and its ability to hold up a person, he must raise his ice pick about two feet above the ice and let it drop. If the weight of the ice pick allows the point to penetrate the ice but stops where it is attached to the wooden handle, he can try crossing on the ice. If, on the other hand, it does not stop at the point of

intersection, then it will not hold up the man. In this case, the former happened. The man then looked around him, looking at the beauty, the might of Nature, and realizing the energies that abound. When he gets on the ice, he must maintain a steady pace for if he stops or begins to run he will fall through because he has broken the rhythm and concentration. The story tells that when he began his journey across there was a lightness and buoyancy in his mind. This feeling was conveyed to his physical being. Although the ice crackled and waved, he made it to the other side. He drew energy from Nature, and was in rhythm with the sea and ice, and coupled with lightness and buoyancy made it safely to the other side.

In the “Bear Woman” story, two youngsters come into being. They find themselves in an abandoned village. It has been some time since the people disappeared by indications from the decay of semi-subterranean houses and artifacts in the village. One possible explanation of why the people were gone might be that these Yupiaq people may have reached the apex of spirituality which is pure consciousness. Their bodies became the universe and their pair of eyes became part of “Ellam iinga”, the eye of the universe. This could explain how some communities became mysteriously deserted.

Western physics with its quantum and relativity theories say that we are mostly energy. Why then should not our spirit or soul be energy? Scientific technology has given proof of energy fields, personal aura, findings from near death experiences, and many other human experiences. Theory of relativity tells us that matter is condensed energy and also conveys that the world is made up of relationships. This seems to say that our spirit is made up of energy. Then if this is true, the Alaska Native person must be able to draw energy from earth because we are a part of it. All life comes from earth. Alaska Native peoples’ metaphysic is Nature becomes corroborated by the Western theories. This also strengthens the argument that the laboratory for teaching and learning be place where one lives. Being outdoors in Nature enjoying its beauty, energy, amongst messages to be learned, and becoming a part of it. This would bring back the respect of personal self, and if one respects oneself then, certainly one would be able to respect others, Nature and the spirits that dwell in and amongst all things of Nature. The students will be able to whet their observational skills while learning from Nature and drawing energy to themselves. They can again attain love and care with all its concomitant values and attitudes that give life. It is imperative that the students from all walks of life begin to experience and get close to Nature.

It is this drawing of energy from Nature that will allow the self to again become strong so that the circle becomes closed (back to Fig. 1). But the individual and community will

allow chosen outside values and traditions to filter in that they think will strengthen their minds, bodies and spirits. The Alaska Native people will again become whole people and know what to be and what to do.