

An indigenous approach to global crisis

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In the Nuu-chah-nulth world view, life's major purpose is the development of harmonious relationships between and among all life

To make. Seemingly such a simple verb, it encompasses everything from the smallest humble action to the greatest work of genius.

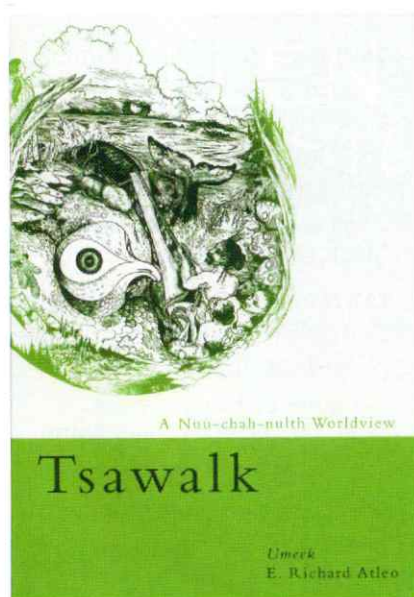
It is also the most literal meaning, I am told, of *Umeek*, the Nuu-chah-nulth name of hereditary chief, UVic associate adjunct professor and author E. Richard Atleo. "It is one of those words always lost in translation," he explains by phone from Winnipeg, adding, "In our culture it is a chief's name, so it means 'chief's work,' which is to provide for his community."

In his newly-reissued book *Principles of Tsawalk: An Indigenous Approach to Global Crisis* (UBC Press, November 2011, paperback July 2012), Umeek humbly and with genius does just that: provides wisdom and life strategy for his community, which is not just Nuu-chah-nulth, but all of us—humans, plants, animals—trying to live together on *Haw'ilume*, Wealthy Mother Earth.

Born in Ahousaht, Umeek notes that his community's then-remoteness meant he grew up in the ancient ways of his people. However, he also suffered the residential school system and went on into the world of Western academia, earning a BA, MEd and EdD (he's been labelled the first aboriginal man to earn his doctorate in BC, a claim Umeek says he cannot verify). Through a difficult journey of great unlearning and relearning, Umeek managed to bring these two knowledge systems—indigenous and Western—and their respective strengths together, first

in himself and then in his work. In fact, the theme of his work is interconnection, interrelation, and how apparent dichotomies and divisions fit into unity.

Tsawalk means "one" and expresses the idea that all life is part of an integrated whole. It is a central concept of the Nuu-chah-nulth world view, and Umeek believes it is key to understanding and addressing today's world in crisis. What crisis exactly? Look around and pick one. Environmental. Economic. Political. Crises of energy, education, terrorism, nuclear threat.



"Today," Umeek writes, "the experience of things falling apart has become a global phenomenon," and therefore "must, by definition, be a shared responsibility."

This global imbalance, Umeek surmises, is rooted in a crisis of perception related to the stories that define our civilization. For example, the book describes how *tsawalk* expressed in Nuu-chah-nulth origin stories reveals "life's major purpose, namely, the development of harmonious relationships between and among all life forms." However, it also explores how the Western science-based world view, from the Big Bang



Umeek (E. Richard Atleo)

through Darwinian evolution, fails us because it creates space for misunderstanding, conflict and oppression, being "indifferent to the well-being of human societies." If it's true that "beliefs about the nature of reality translate into principles, teachings, laws, and what today we would label policies," then the crux of our difficulty—whether in our communities, our environment or the basis of liberal democracy—is that we can't address global crises while operating from a story offering us no purpose as human beings.

"The first book," the gentle-voiced Umeek explains, referring to *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview* (UBC Press, 2004), "was essentially based on my personal experience of racism at university. It was therefore a defence of where I came from, of my family and my experiences, which were said to be irrelevant." The second book, he says, follows, as it demonstrates the value of his people's lifeway not just inherently but for the lessons it offers the wider world, including the Western-worldview generator: academia.

"It is not meant to attack," he tells me, "but to expose." In fact, the book contains remarkably little emotionalism or bitterness. "A belief in the mystery of creation," he tells me, "prevents extreme reactions because our stories teach us that we don't understand enough to be definitive. It's like Einstein's statement about how we do not know one thousandth of one percent of what nature is. Aboriginals have the same point of view about reality. What is significant is how little humans know."

What's also significant is *how* we know the little we do know. In ancient Nuu-chah-nulth society, vision quest knowledge was experi-

So nice to come home to

ence-based, and myths were tested and proven true. Such practice seems opposed to the empirical research of the scientific method, but Umcek says they are equally valid ways of testing one's cultural stories and, therefore, one's world view.

The book is therefore also a call to contemporary Nuu-chah-nulth (and all of us) to reconnect with the principles of their ancient culture—principles of recognition, consent, respect and continuity, principles that can perhaps heal personal as well as political and even environmental wounds.

Umcek has been involved in education and environmental issues for a very long, rich career. He has held posts in research and teaching at UBC, Simon Fraser University, Malaspina (now Vancouver Island University), and University of Manitoba; been co-chair of the Scientific Panel for Sustainable Forest Practices in Clayquot Sound; and board member at the Centre for Indigenous Environmental Resources. And there's another book in the works. (He can also take some credit for being the father of Shawn Atleo, chief of the Assembly of First Nations.)

When I ask what it is that drives him to such accomplishments in the face of so many obstacles, he laughs and says: "Leonard Cohen, when asked where his inspiration came from, said: 'If I knew, I would go there more often.' Not knowing makes him a great man to me."

And when I ask if he's hopeful about our global future, he replies: "I can't answer that question by looking at contemporary society, because the answers are hidden. But when I look at our stories, they sway human beings in the way of survival, even in the face of great devastation. Good prevails over evil. Light prevails over darkness. The stories don't say how it's going to be done. Life doesn't hand anything to us on a plate. You've got to work hard. Roll up your sleeves and talk to your neighbour."



Amy Reiswig is taking up Umcek's challenge to view polarity as a benefit rather than a threat: "a challenge to grow rather than to destroy."



Wellesley resident Sara Cook

Boomers bringing their parents to The Wellesley for a tour, often remark, "I'd like to live here!" And why not? The independent living apartments are the roomiest in the city at 600 to 1400 square feet, and feature full kitchens, walk in closets, nice big bathrooms, and panoramic views from large windows. There's a gym, hair salon, library, billiard room, wood-working shop, and small grocery store onsite—as well as a lounge, a chapel and a rooftop garden. Gardeners can have their own garden plot. Pet lovers can bring their cat or dog. The airy, light-filled lounge is reminiscent of a grand hotel's lobby and invites dallying and mingling, and hosts regular "happy hours."

And then there's the food. Residents prepare their own breakfast, but suppers are included in the monthly rent (lunches are optional). The Wellesley is known for its high quality, varied menu. On any given evening residents are faced with a choice between two salads, and among three entrees—for instance: pepper steak, grilled sole or lamb moussaka. There's always two vegetables, rice or potatoes, and dessert.

Flexibility is another reason for The Wellesley's popularity. Residents can wander into the dining room for service anytime between 4:30 and 6:00. And if they miss a dinner, they get a credit which they can apply towards lunches or treating a guest for dinner.

The full kitchens in each unit also mean residents who like to cook, can—before Christmas there was lots of baking going on. Weekly bus trips to the grocery store and all major shopping malls makes stocking up convenient and easy.

The Wellesley is known for its high quality menu



But probably the main key to the happiness of The Wellesley's residents is its sense of community. Says marketing coordinator Margo McIntosh, "I see people blossom here; I see relationships happen. It's really neat." One long-time resident, Sara Cook, says, "The atmosphere here is great! Both the residents and the staff are all so happy here."

Whereas originally The Wellesley only offered independent living, it now has a separate building with 64 assisted living units for those who require a bit more help. Each of these units have a full wheel chair accessible bathroom with walk-in shower, as well as a kitchenette. Residents' packages include both lunch and dinner in their own lovely dining room. An emergency call system is included, and residents have access to all Wellesley activities and services.

Onsite activities ranging from bridge to discussion of current events, movies, fitness classes, educational



Margo McIntosh with residents Dorothea and Judy

presentations, and entertainers keep residents healthy in body, mind and spirit. Laughter is a regular sound here. And there's a 16-seater bus that regularly whisks residents to Chemainus Theatre, Imax, Butchart Gardens, restaurants, Sunday drives and mystery trips. Margo reports that many adult children say their parents are now so busy it's hard to get hold of them.

There are studios and one and two-bedroom suites—18 floor plans in all. And secured underground parking if needed. Residents can enjoy the privacy of their unit, or head down the hall to join in their community.

And it's all surprisingly affordable. When you compare the approximate \$2200/month with what a senior might pay for rent or strata fees, utilities, maintenance, food, transportation, activities, property taxes, insurance and the like, you'll be truly impressed.

Call Margo and ask about a personal tour and the new three-night free trial. And everyone is invited to the Open House on Saturday, October 13, 1-4 pm.

The Wellesley
2800 Blanshard Street
250-383-9099, ext 207
www.retirementconcepts.com