

1. This is How It Was:

Two Views of History

Long, long ago, when the world was so new that even the stars were dark, it was very, very flat. Chareya, Old Man Above, could not see through the dark to the new, flat earth. Neither could he step down to it because it was so far below him. With a large stone he bored a hole in the sky. Then through the hole he pushed down masses of ice and snow, until a great pyramid rose from the plain. Old Man Above climbed down through the hole he had made in the sky, stepping from cloud to cloud, until he could put his foot on top of the mass of ice and snow. Then with one long step he reached the earth.

The sun shone through the hole in the sky and began to melt the ice and snow. It made holes in the ice and snow. When it was soft, Chareya bored with his finger into the earth, here and there, and planted the first trees. Streams from the melting snow watered the new trees and made them grow. Then he gathered the leaves which fell from the trees and blew upon them. They became birds. He took a stick and broke it into pieces. Out of the small end he made fishes and placed them in the mountain streams. Of the middle of the stick, he made all the animals except the grizzly bear. From the big end of the stick came the grizzly bear, who was made master of all. Grizzly was large and strong and cunning. When the earth was new he walked upon two feet and carried a large club. So strong was Grizzly that Old Man Above feared the creature he had made. Therefore, so that he might be safe, Chareya hollowed out the pyramid of ice and snow as a tepee. There he lived for thousands of snows. The people knew he lived there because they could see the smoke curling from the smoke-hole of his tepee. When the white man came, Old Man Above went away. There is no longer

any smoke from the smoke-hole. White men call the tepee Mount Shasta.

Shastika, California

Within most Native American cultures there is no clear distinction between 'story' and 'history'. Both are part of the oral tradition, the rich profusion of anecdotes and legends by which each tribe and nation explains the creation of the world and its own origins and experience. As a result, from the perspective of most Western scholars, they are simply 'myths', which – with few exceptions – can tell us almost nothing worthwhile about 'what really happened.'

But a 'myth' – despite the widespread use of the word to mean 'falsehood' – is not simply a 'lie' or a childish fantasy. As the writer Ronald Wright puts it:

Myth is an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that resonate with a culture's deepest values and aspirations. Myths create and reinforce archetypes so taken for granted, so seemingly axiomatic, that they go unchallenged. Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them. They are the maps by which cultures navigate through time.

And the myths of Western culture, even if we have consciously rejected them, continue to shape and pervade our contemporary view of the world – including our view of history. Many of the West's most fundamental assumptions about the universe – the assumptions that separate us most profoundly from other cultures – are deeply rooted in our own origin legend. The Book of Genesis is a story of sin, banishment and loss: it tells us that we are the Lords of Creation, made for a life of ease and harmony in the Garden of Eden, but that we forfeited Paradise through our own wickedness. Finding that Eve has taken the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God first curses the serpent who 'beguiled' her, and then:

To the woman he said,

I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,

yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you.'

And to Adam he said,

'Because you have listened to the voice of your wife,
and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you,
"You shall not eat of it,"
cursed is the ground because of you;
in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you;
and you shall eat the plants of the field.
In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
till you return to the ground,
for out of it you were taken;
you are dust,
and to dust you shall return.'

Then, 'lest [man] put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever ... the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.'

This primal catastrophe has left us profoundly dislocated: we are exiles in an alien wilderness which we must struggle to subdue. With every generation we move further and further from the gates of Eden, sustained only by dreams of somehow regaining our lost innocence or of creating a new heaven on earth.

Rather than returning us to our original state of grace, the incarnation only deepens our separation from it by enshrining the concept of linear time: by intervening in our destiny at a specific, defined moment, God gives us a fixed point from which our history unravels away from Eden like a ball of string. As the philosopher Alan Watts puts it: '... according to St. Augustine of Hippo, the universe is going along in a straight line ... If time is cyclic, Jesus Christ would have to be crucified again and again. There would not be, therefore, that one perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. Time had to be a straight line from the creation to