

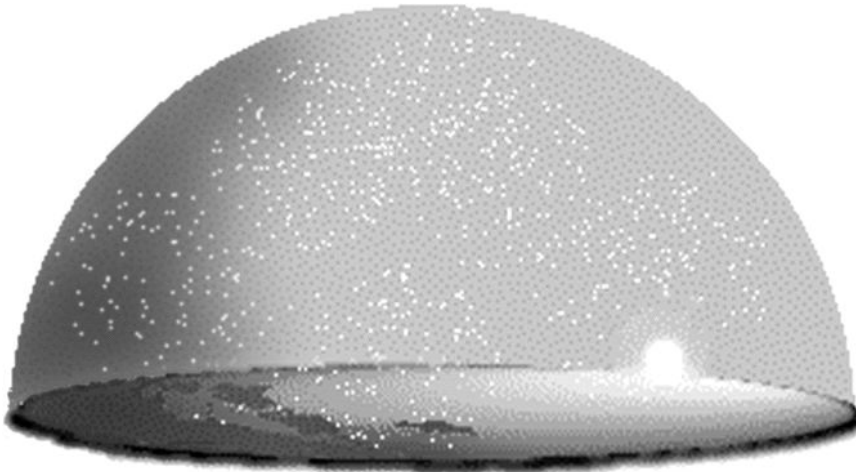
To really understand something you have to play with it in your *own* head for a while. The accounts and descriptions of someone else can be invaluable help, but you really have to engage the thing intellectually if you want to own it.

I will relate to you a story, which illustrates this point. This is the oldest story of our species. It actually predates the advent of written language. Indeed, it predates even the earliest records of human history. It comes to me, across the gulf of time, directly through genetic memory.¹

Our ancestors came to self-awareness on a Thursday afternoon at 2:17 (genetic memory is obsessively precise). A long, long time ago the People awakened to full understanding of the universe and their place within it.

The world was known to be a vast flat disk arched by the dome of the sky. The People lived at the center of the disk and the Sun and stars and Moon passed over them from a point on the edge of the disk of the world to a point on the opposite side. What lay beyond the edge of the world was unknown. The edge of the world was far, far away and had never been reached even by the most adventurous hunters.

It was determined that someone must go to the edge of the world and see what lay beyond. A meeting of all the People was held to decide who should go on this trek to the edge of the world and bring back this knowledge. This meeting was called the First General Session.



The ablest and strongest of the hunters offered themselves to this great task. The council of elders considered each on his merit but it was decided that the hunters were too valuable to the tribe and could not be risked. The old Shaman explained further that none of these young men could be trusted with the powerful medicine of the knowledge of the edge of the world. That man, he said, would return to the tribe as a being of absolute

¹ The existence of human genetic memory has never been established. This is just a story, okay?

power who would disrupt the institution of the ruling elders and rule the People as a tyrant.

Certainly, no member of the council could be spared for the journey. It was clear that this perilous undertaking might fail and the traveler might never return to the tribe.

One member of the inner circle proposed sending a woman. This preposterous recommendation was loudly jeered and subsequently withdrawn without a vote. The old Shaman explained the foolishness of this plan. A woman with such power would destroy the tribe, he said. If women ruled the tribe and made important decisions, the People would fall into chaos and ruin. At this point, the women, who sat on the perimeter, outside the inner circle, all laughed. We still do not know why.

After much discussion it was put forward that a small boy should make the trip. Surely a boy would pose no threat. The knowledge of the edge of the world could be brought back and shared with the ruling council in executive session. The boy traveler would share his power and be no more than a vessel for the powerful medicine of the edge.

The old Shaman rose again and struck the ground with his staff.

"Fools! he cried. A boy will forget what he has seen before the Sun can cross the sky."

He went on to say that a boy might forget to come home at all, or he might stop to explore the mouth of a crocodile.

"I will tell you how this must be done, he said. An old man shall be chosen from the tribe, one so old as to die shortly after his return. He shall carry with him a young girl, for young girls have no power and can never be a threat. Also, a small girl might prove valuable, should the need to ask directions arise. On their return the old one will die and the girl will be made a sacrifice to the spirits as soon as she has been debriefed by the council."

The solution was adopted by acclamation and was followed by the Ritual of Self-Congratulation and the ancient and sacred Celebration of Extreme Cleverness. It lasted far into the night. Great quantities of the sacred beverage were consumed.

Relatively late on the following morning an old grandfather and the youngest of his granddaughters were selected. They were supplied with the necessary protective icons and talismans and other artifacts possessing powerful medicine. They were escorted to the outer boundaries of the village and there dispatched on the greatest adventure ever undertaken by human beings.

It is a long way to the end of the world. The old man and the tiny girl walked and walked and walked. After a time, when they were far from the realm of the People, they

entered into strange lands inhabited by strange and wonderful animals of unusual size and shape. Some of the animals were friendly or slow in their movements and some of these were found to taste good when eaten, but others caused evil spirits to come into the belly and make the sickness.

Slowly, they learned which animals could be eaten and which should be left alone. There were other animals also, and some of these tried to taste the old man and the girl. The growly animals were warded off by the icons and the talismans and by The Ritual of the Running and Screaming and the Climbing of the Trees.

Sometimes the old man faltered and his legs grew stiff and sore and he had to lean upon the little girl for strength. At other times the little one became so tired that she could not walk and the old man carried her in his arms. The little girl took up a chant to help the old man in his walking. She sang: "Grandfather, are we there yet" and he would respond: "Almost there, just a little longer."

They came upon great mountains, which took many days to cross. They came upon great rivers and were nearly drowned in the traverse. They came upon towering trees that reached up all the way to the dome of the sky and upon great canyons, so deep that they seemed to cut right through the hard disk of the world to the very motherboard of creation.

The greatest of all the discoveries was other tribes; other "people." At first glance they seemed normal in their aspect but upon closer view, they revealed themselves to be strange beyond belief. They wore feathers as adornments instead of bones and they played strange music on different drums. Some were very frightening and all spoke with different sounds and odd gestures.

Some were tall and thin and others were short and wide. These tribes of course lived far from the center of the disk and were not "The Chosen." The old man traded with the strange ones and collected many strange treasures and articles of unknown power.

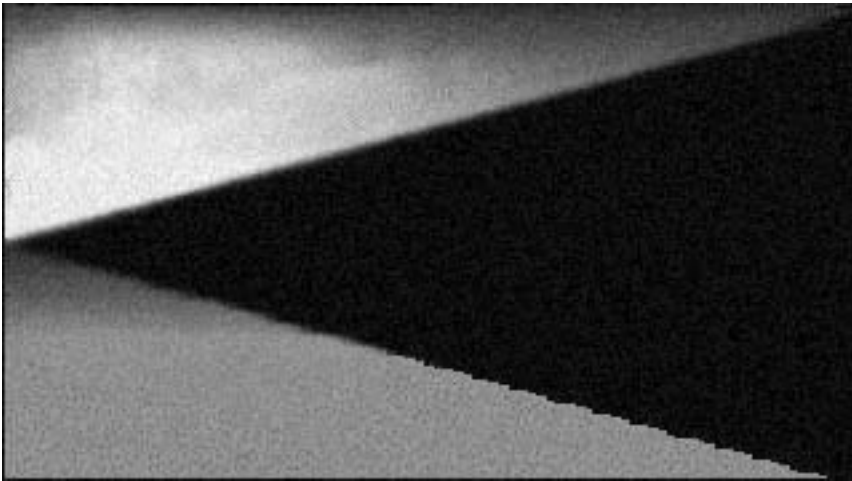
They traveled on through lands of incredible cold where snow covered everything. They crossed great barren desserts where nothing grew but sand and misery. They came upon dense forests, lush with strange plants and filled with peculiar birds. They skirted great seas that were too wide to swim. They walked, and walked, and walked. After a long, long time they came within sight of the edge of the world.

In the distance they saw the place where the great red Sun fell below the edge of the world to hide from the scary darkness until the light returned on the far side and it was safe to rise again. After a long rest and some food, they set out for the edge. On and on they walked for days and days. At night they rested. Looking back in the direction they had come, their footprints seemed to disappear into the distance. The edge of the world seemed no closer.

They spoke little. The little girl stopped her chant. Their eyes remained fixed on the far away edge as they walked. At last they arrived at the edge of the world. They fell upon the ground in despair.

Standing there, at the edge of the world was a high wall. It was taller than a man can reach, taller than a man can jump. The wall stretched away as far as they could see in both directions. The land near the wall was barren and as smooth as glass, as black as night. There were no footholds or depressions in the great wall, no place to grasp or climb. For a long time they sat in silence.

Finally the old man got up and approached the wall. He extended his arms as far up as they would stretch and then he turned and called to the little girl.



He measured her, and in his mind he added her height to the extent of his arms. It would work. Her eyes showed that she understood and she nodded. They were much too tired for the Ritual of Self-Congratulation or the Celebration of Extreme Cleverness.

The old man gathered all his strength and lifted her as high as he could reach. He held the child's thin legs at the knees. He felt her lighten as she grasped the top of the wall with her tiny fingers, and pulled, and stretched, and looked over the edge.

The old man felt her body stiffen. Her breathing stopped then started again. She trembled. Her pulse raced and then was slow. Except for her breathing she was motionless. Silent tears ran down her cheeks and fell upon the old man's head. For a long time they stood.

The old man called upon all his power to hold the child aloft. He leaned his face against the cool surface of the wall. He closed his eyes and locked his arms and fingers. When the pain became unbearable, still he held her up. When the muscles began to spasm, still he held her up. And then, she went limp. As if crumbling into his hands, she started to slip down the smooth surface. His arms buckled and they pooled together at the base of the wall.

The silence was broken only by their ragged, labored breathing. The old man looked at the girl. Her eyes shone with an odd light. Her gaze was fixed at a distance that human vision had never known. Slowly she focused on his wrinkled ancient face. She smiled a smile of purest joy and tears glazed her eyes again.

“Oh Grandfather!” she said.

“What did you see?” he said. She reached for her Grandfather and held his face in her tiny hands.

“Oh Grandfather!”

“What did you see my child?”

“Oh Grandfather!”

“Yes, I am here, but *what* did you see?”

“Oh Grandfather ”

“Yes... Tell me...What did you *see*? ...*Granddaughter, please, tell me. What did you see?*”

“Grandfather, ...You just had to *be* there.”

Epilogue:

Many have been to the edge since that time, and in all the intervening centuries, no one has ever brought back the power of the knowledge of the edge of the world. The old still bring the young to the wall to hold them up to look over the edge. The old can never see it for themselves and the young must be held up by someone.