“You’ll Never Believe What Happened” Is Always a Great Way to Start’

There is a story I know. It’s about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it’s the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle’s back. And the turtle never swims away.

One time, it was in Prince Rupert I think, a young girl in the audience asked about the turtle and the earth. If the earth was on the back of a turtle, what was below the turtle? Another turtle, the storyteller told her. And below that turtle? Another turtle. And below that? Another turtle.

The girl began to laugh, enjoying the game, I imagine. So how many turtles are there? she wanted to know. The storyteller shrugged. No one knows for sure, he told her, but it’s turtles all the way down.

The truth about stories is that that’s all we are. The Okanagan storyteller Jeannette Armstrong tells us “Through my language I understand I am being spoken to, I’m not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of the Okanagan people and the land around them. I am a listener to the language’s stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns.”

When I was a kid, I was partial to stories about other worlds and interplanetary travel. I used to imagine that I could just gaze off into space and be whisked to another planet, much like John Carter in Edgar Rice Burrough’s Mars series. I’d like to tell you that I was interested in outer space or that the stars fascinated me or that I was curious about the shape and nature of the universe. Fact of the matter was I just wanted to get out of town. Wanted to get as far away from where I was as I could. At fifteen, Pluto looked good. Tiny, cold, lonely. As far from the sun as you could get.

I’m sure part of it was teenage angst, and part of it was being poor in a rich country, and part of it was knowing that white was more than just a colour. And part of it was seeing the world through my mother’s eyes.

My mother raised my brother and me by herself, in an era when women were not welcome in the workforce, when their proper place was out of sight in the home. It was supposed to be a luxury granted women by men. But having misplaced her man, or more properly having had him misplace himself, she had no such luxury and was caught between what she was supposed to be – invisible and female – and what circumstances dictated she become – visible and, well, not male. Self-supporting perhaps. That was it. Visible and self-supporting.

As a child and as a young man, I watched her make her way from doing hair in a converted garage to designing tools for the aerospace industry. It was a long, slow journey. At Aerojet in California, she began as a filing clerk. By the end of the first year, she was doing drafting work, though she was still classified and paid as a filing clerk. By the end of the second year, with night school stuffed into the cracks, she was doing numerical-control engineering and was still classified and paid as a filing clerk.

It was, after all, a man’s world, and each step she took had to be made as quietly as possible, each movement camouflaged against complaint. For over thirty years, she held to the shadows, stayed in the shade.

I knew the men she worked with. They were our neighbours and our friends. I listened to their stories about work and play, about their dreams and their disappointments. Your mother, they liked to tell me, is just one of the boys. But she wasn’t. I knew it. She knew it better.

In 1963, my mother and five of her colleagues were recruited by the Boeing Company to come to Seattle, Washington, as part of a numerical-control team. Everyone was promised equal status, which, for my mother, meant being brought into Boeing as a fully fledged, salaried engineer.

So she went. It was more money, more prestige. And when she got there, she was told that, while everyone else would be salaried and would have engineer status, she would be an hourly employee and would have the same status as the other two women in the department, who were production assistants. So after selling everything in order to make the move, she found herself in a job where she made considerably less than the other members of the team, where she had to punch a time clock, and where she wasn’t even eligible for benefits or a pension.

She objected. That wasn’t the promise, she told her supervisor. You brought everyone else in as equals, why not me?

She didn't really have to ask that question. She knew the answer. You probably know it too. The other five members of the team were men. She was the only woman. Don't worry, she was told, if your work is good, you'll get promoted at the end of the first year.

So she waited. There wasn't much she could do about it. And at the end of the first year, when the review of her work came back satisfactory, she was told she would have to wait another year. And when that year was up . . .

I told her she was crazy to allow people to treat her like that. But she knew the nature of the world in which she lived, and I did not. And yet she has lived her life with an optimism of the intellect and an optimism of the will. She understands the world as a good place where good deeds should beget good rewards. At eighty-one, she still believes that world is possible, even though she will now admit she never found it, never even caught a glimpse of it.

My father is a different story. I didn't know him. He left when I was three or four. I have one memory of a man who took me to a small café that had wooden booths with high backs and a green parrot that pulled at my hair. I don't think this was my father. But it might have been.

For a long time I told my friends that my father had died, which was easier than explaining that he had left us. Then when I was nine, I think, my mother got a call from him asking if he could come home and start over. My mother said okay. I'll be home in three days, he told her.

And that was the last we ever heard from him.

My mother was sure that something had happened to him. Somewhere between Chicago and California. No one would call to say they were coming home and then not show up, unless they had been injured or killed. So she waited for him. So did I.

And then when I was fifty-six or fifty-seven, my brother called me. Sit down, Christopher said, I've got some news. I was living in Ontario, and I figured that if my brother was calling me all the way from California, telling me to sit down, it had to be bad news, something to do with my mother.

But it wasn't.

You'll never believe what happened, my brother said.

That's always a good way to start a story, you know: you'll never believe what happened.

And he was right.

We found our father. That's exactly what he said. We found our father.

I had dreamed about such an occurrence. Finding my father. Not as a child, but as a grown man. One of my more persistent fictions was to catch up with him in a bar, sitting on a stool, having a beer. A dark, dank bar, stinking of sorrow, a bar where men who had deserted their families went to drink and die.

He wouldn't recognize me. I'd sit next to him, and after a while the two of us would strike up a conversation.

What do you do for a living? How do you like the new Ford? You believe those Blue Jays?

Guy talk. Short sentences. Lots of nodding.

You married? Any kids?

And then I'd give him a good look at me. A good, long look. And just as he began to remember, just as he began to realize who I might be, I'd leave. *Hasta la vista*. Toodle-loo. See you around. I wouldn't tell him about my life or what I had been able to accomplish, or how many grandchildren he had or how much I had missed not having a father in my life.

Screw him. I had better things to do than sit around with some old bastard and talk about life and responsibility.

So when my brother called to tell me that we had found our father, I ran through the bar scene one more time. So I'd be ready.

Here's what happened. My father had two sisters. We didn't know them very well, and, when my father disappeared, we lost track of that side of the family. So we had no way of knowing that when my father left us, he vanished from his sisters' lives as well. I suppose they thought he was dead, too. But evidently his oldest sister wasn't sure, and, after she had retired and was getting on in years, she decided to make one last attempt to find out what had happened to him.

She was not a rich woman, but she spotted an advertisement in a local newspaper that offered the services of a detective who would find lost or missing relatives for $75. Flat rate. Satisfaction guaranteed.

My brother took a long time in telling this story, drawing out the details, repeating the good parts, making me wait.

The detective, it turned out, was a retired railroad employee who knew how to use a computer and a phone book. If Robert King was alive and if he hadn't changed his name, he'd have a phone and an address. If he was dead, there should be a death certificate floating around somewhere. The detective's name was Fred or George, I don't remember, and he was a bulldog.

It took him two days. Robert King was alive and well in Illinois.

Christopher stopped at this point in the story to let me catch my breath. I was already making reservations to fly to Chicago, to rent a car, to find that bar.

That's the good news, my brother told me.

One of the tricks to storytelling is, never tell everything at once, to make your audience wait, to keep everyone in suspense.

My father had married two more times. Christopher had all the details. Seven other children. Seven brothers and sisters we had never known about. Barbara, Robert, Kelly.

What's the bad news? I wanted to know.

Oh, that, said my brother. The bad news is that he's dead.

Evidently, just after the railroad detective found him, my father slipped in a river, hit his head on a rock, and died in a hospital. My aunt, the one who had hired the detective, wen to Illinois for the funeral and to meet her brother's other families for the first time.

You're going to like the next part, my brother told me.

I should warn you that my brother had a particular fondness for irony.

When my aunt got to the funeral, the oldest boy, Robert King Jr. evidently began a sentence with "I guess as the oldest boy . . ." Whereupon my aunt told the family about Christopher and me.

They knew about each other. The two families. Were actually close, but they had never heard about us. My father had never mentioned us. It was as though he had disposed of us somewhere along the way, dropped us in a trash can by the side of the road.

That's my family. These are their stories.

So what? I've heard worse stories. So have you. Open today's paper and you'll find two or three that make mine sound like a Disney trailer. Starvation. Land mines. Suicide bombings. Sectarian violence. Sexual abuse. Children stacked up like cordwood in refugee camps around the globe. So what makes my mother's sacrifice special? What makes my father's desertion unusual?

Absolutely nothing.

Matter of fact, the only people who have any interest in either of these stories are my brother and me. I tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live.

Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous. The Native novelist Leslie Silko, in her book *Ceremony*, tells how evil came into the world. It was witch people. Not Whites or Indians or Blacks or Asians or Hispanics. Witch people. Witch people from all over the world, way back when, and they all came together for a witches' conference. In a cave. Having a good time. A contest, actually. To see who could come up with the scariest thing. Some of them brewed up potions in pots. Some of them jumped in and out of animal skins. Some of them thought up charms and spells.

It must have been fun to watch.

Until finally there was only one witch left who hadn't done anything. No one knew where this witch came from or if the witch was male or female. And all this witch had was a story.

Unfortunately the story this witch told was an awful thing full of fear and slaughter, disease and blood. A story of murderous mischief. And when the telling was done, the other witches quickly agreed that this witch had won the prize.

"Okay you win," they said. "[B]ut what you said just now – it isn't so funny. It doesn't sound so good. We are doing okay without it. We can get along without that kind of thing. Take it back. Call that story back."

But, of course, it was too late. For once a story is told, it is loose in the world.

So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told. But if I ever get to Pluto, that's how I would like to begin. With a story. Maybe I'd tell the inhabitants of Pluto one of the stories I know. Maybe they'd tell me one of theirs. It wouldn't matter who

went first. But which story? That's the real question. Personally, I'd want to hear a creation story, a story that recounts how the world was formed, how things came to be, for contained within creation stories are relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist.

And as luck would have it, I happen to know a few. But I have a favourite. It's about a woman who fell from the sky. And it goes like this.

Back at the beginning of imagination, the world we know as earth was nothing but water, while above the earth, somewhere in space, was a larger, more ancient world. And on that world was a woman.

A crazy woman.

Well, she wasn't exactly crazy. She was more nosy. Curious. The kind of curious that doesn't give up. The kind that follows you around. Now, we all know that being curious is healthy, but being *curious* can get you into trouble.

Don't be too curious, the Birds told her.

Okay, she said, I won't.

But you know what? That's right. She kept on being curious.

One day while she was bathing her feet in the river, she happened to look at her feet and discovered that she had five toes on each foot. One big one and four smaller ones. They had been there all along, of course, but now that the woman noticed them for the first time, she wondered why she had five toes instead of three. Or eight. And she wondered if more toes were better than fewer toes.

So she asked her Toes. Hey, she said, how come there are only five of you?

You're being curious again, said her Toes.

Another day, the woman was walking through the forest and found a moose relaxing in the shade by a lake.

Hello, said the Moose. Aren't you that nosy woman?

Yes, I am, said the woman, and what I want to know is why you are so much larger than me.

That's easy, said the Moose, and he walked into the lake and disappeared.

Don't you love cryptic stories? I certainly do.

Now before we go any further, we should give this woman a name so we don't have to keep calling her "the woman." How about Blanche? Catherine? Thelma? Okay, I know expressing and opinion can be embarrassing. So let's do it the way we always do it and let someone else make the decision for us. Someone we trust. Someone who will promise lower taxes. Someone like me.

I say we call her Charm. Don't worry. We can change it later on if we want to.

So one day the woman we've decided to call Charm went looking for something good to eat. She looked at the fish, but she was not in the mood for fish. She looked at rabbit, but she didn't feel like eating rabbit either.

I've got this craving, said Charm.

What kind of craving? said Fish.

I want to eat something, but I don't know what it is.

Maybe you're pregnant, said Rabbit. Whenever I get pregnant, I get cravings.

Hmmmmm, said Charm, maybe I am.

And you know what? She was.

What you need, Fish and Rabbit told Charm, is some Red Fern Root.

Yes, said Charm, that sounds delicious. What is it?

It's a root, said Fish, and it only grows under the oldest trees. And it's the perfect thing for pregnant humans.

Now, you're probably thinking that this is getting pretty silly, what with chatty fish and friendly rabbits, with moose disappearing into lakes and talking toes. And you're probably wondering how in the world I expect you to believe any of this, given the fact that we live in a predominantly scientific, capitalistic, Judeo-Christian world governed by physical laws, economic imperatives, and spiritual precepts.

Is that what you're thinking?

It's okay. You won't hurt my feelings.

So Charm went looking for some Red Fern Root. She dug around this tree and she dug around the tree, but she couldn't find any. Finally she came to the oldest tree in the forest and she began digging

around its base. By now she was very hungry, and she was very keen on some Red Fern Root, so she really got into the digging. And before long she had dug a rather deep hole.

Don't dig too deep, Badger told her.

Mind your own business, Charm told him.

Okay, said Badger, but don't blame me if you make a mistake.

You can probably guess what happened. That's right. Charm dug right through to the other side of the world.

That's curious, said Charm, and she stuck her head into that hole so she could get a better view.

That's very curious, she said again, and she stuck her head even farther into the hole.

Sometimes when I tell this story to children, I slow it down and have Charm stick her head into that hole by degrees. But most of you are adults and have already figured out that Charm is going to stick her head into that hole so far that she's either going to get stuck or she's going to fall through.

And sure enough, she fell through. Right through that hole and into the sky.

Uh-oh, Charm thought to herself. That wasn't too smart.

But she couldn't do much about it now. And she began to tumble through the sky, began to fall and fall and fall and fall. Spinning and turning, floating through the vast expanse of space.

And off in the distance, just on the edge of sight, was a small blue dot floating in the heavens. And as Charm tumbled down through the black sky, the dot got bigger and bigger.

You've probably figured this part out, too, but just so there's no question, this blue dot is the earth. Well, sort of. It's the earth when it was young. When there was nothing but water. When it was simply a water world.

And Charm was heading right for it.

In the meantime, on this water world, on earth, a bunch of water animals were swimming and floating around and diving and talking about how much fun water is.

Water, water, water, said the Ducks. There's nothing like water.

Yes, said the Muskrats, we certainly like being wet.

It's even better when you're under water, said the Sunfish.

Try jumping into it, said the Dolphins. And just as the Dolphins said this, they looked up into the sky.

Uh-oh, said the Dolphins, and everyone looked up in time to see Charm falling towards them. And as she came around the moon, the water animals were suddenly face with four variable – mass, velocity, compression, and displacement – and with two problems.

The Ducks, who have great eyesight, could see that Charm weighed in at about 150 pounds. And the Beavers, who have a head for physics and math, knew that she was coming in fast. Accelerating at thirty-two feet per second to be precise (give or take a little drag and atmospheric friction). And the Whales knew from many years of study that water does not compress, while the Dolphins could tell anyone who asked that while it won't compress, water will displace.

Which brought the animals to the first of two problems. If Charm hit the water at full speed, it was going to create a very large tidal wave and ruin everyone's day.

So quick as they could, all the water birds flew up and formed a net with their bodies, and, as Charm came streaking down, the birds caught her, broke her fall, and brought her gently down to the surface of the water.

Just in time.

To deal with the second of the two problems. Where to put her.

They could just dump her in the water, but it didn't take a pelican to see that Charm was not a water creature.

Can you swim? asked the Sharks.

Not very well, said Charm.

How about holding your breath for a long time? asked the Sea Horses.

Maybe for a minute or two, said Charm.

Floating? said the Seals. Can you float?

I don't know, said Charm. I never really tried floating.

So what are we going to do with you? said the Lobsters.

Hurry up, said the Birds, flapping their wings as hard as they could.

Perhaps you could put me on something large and flat, Charm told the water animals.

Well, as it turns out, the only place in this water world that was large and flat was the back of the Turtle.

Oh, okay, said Turtle. But if anyone else falls out of the sky, she's on her own.

So the water animals put Charm on the back of the Turtle, and everyone was happy. Well, at least for the next month or so. Until the animals noticed that Charm was going to have a baby.

It's going to get a little crowded, said the Muskrats.

What are we going to do? said the Geese.

It wouldn't be so crowded, Charm told the water animals, if we had some dry land.

Charm looked over the side of the Turtle, down into the water, and then she turned to the water animals.

Who's the best diver? she asked.

A contest! screamed the Ducks.

All right! shouted the Muskrats.

What do we have to do? asked the Eels.

It's easy, said Charm. One of you has to dive down to the bottom of the water and bring up some mud.

Sure, said all the water animals, even though they had no idea what mud was.

So, said Charm, who wants to try first?

Me! said Pelican, and he flew into the sky as high as he could and the dropped like a knife into the water. And he was gone for a long time. But when he floated to the surface, out of breath, he didn't have any mud.

It was real dark down there, said Pelican, and cold.

The next animal to try was Walrus.

I don't mind the dark, said Walrus, and my blubber will keep me warm. So down she went, and she was gone for much longer than Pelican, but when she came to the surface, coughing up water, she didn't have any mud, either.

I don't think the water has a bottom, said Walrus. Sorry.

I'm sure you're beginning to wonder if there's a point to this story or if I'm just going to work my way through all the water animals one by one.

So one by one all the water animals tried to find the mud at the bottom of the ocean, and all of them failed until the only animal left was Otter. Otter, however, wasn't particularly interested in finding mud.

Is it fun to play with? asked Otter.

Not really, said Charm.

Is it good to eat? asked Otter.

Not really, said Charm.

Then why do you want to find it? said Otter.

For the magic, said Charm.

Oh, said Otter. I like magic.

So Otter took a deep breath and dove into the water. And she didn't come up. Day after day, Charm and the animals waited for Otter to come to the surface. Finally, on the morning of the fourth day, just as the sun was rising, Otter's body floated up out of the depths.

Oh, no, said all the animals, Otter has drowned trying to find the mud. And they hoisted Otter's body onto the back of the Turtle.

Now, when they hoisted Otter's body onto the back of the Turtle, they noticed that her little paws were clenched shut, and when they opened her paws, they discovered something dark and gooey that wasn't water.

Is this mud? asked the Ducks.

Yes it is, said Charm. Otter has found the mud.

Of course I found the mud, whispered Otter, who wasn't so much dead as she was tired and out of breath. This magic better be worth it.

Charm set the lump of mud on the back of the Turtle, and she sang and danced, and the animals sang and danced with her, and very slowly the lump of mud began to grow. It grew and grew and grew

into a world, part water, part mud. That was a good trick, said the water animals. But now there's not enough room for all of us in the water. Some of us are going to have to live on land.

Not that anyone wanted to live on the land. It was nothing but mud. Mud as far as the eye could see. Great jumbled lumps of mud.

But before the animals could decide who was going to live where or what to do about the mud-lump world, Charm had her baby.

Or rather, she had her babies.

Twins.

A boy and a girl. One light, one dark. One right-handed, one left-handed.

Nice-looking babies, said the Cormorants. Hope they like mud.

And as it turned out, they did. The right-handed Twin smoothed all the mud lumps until the land was absolutely flat.

Wow! said all the animals. That was pretty clever. Now we can see in all directions.

But before the animals could get used to all the nice flat land, the left-handed Twin stomped around in the mud, piled it up, and created deep valleys and tall mountains.

Okay, said the animals, that could work.

And while the animals were admiring the new landscape, the Twins really got busy. The right-handed Twin dug nice straight trenches and filled them with water.

These are rivers, he told the animals, and I've made the water flow in both directions so that it'll be easy to come and go as you please.

That's handy, said the animals.

But as soon as her brother had finished, the left-handed Twin made the rivers crooked and put rocks in the water and made it flow in only one direction.

This is much more exciting, she told the animals.

Could you put in some waterfalls? said the animals. Everyone likes waterfalls.

Sure, said the left-handed Twin. And she did.

The right-handed Twin created forests with all the trees lined up so you could go into the woods and not get lost. The left-handed Twin came along and moved the trees around, so that some of the forest was dense and difficult, and other parts were open and easy.

How about some trees with nuts and fruit? said the animals. In case we get hungry.

That's a good idea, said the right-handed Twin. And he did.

The right-handed Twin created roses. The left-handed Twin put thorns on the stems. The right-handed Twin created summer. The left-handed Twin created winter. The right-handed Twin created sunshine. The left-handed Twin created shadows.

Have we forgotten anything? the Twins asked the animals.

What about human beings? said the animals. Do you think we need human beings?

Why not? said the Twins. And quick as they could the right-handed Twin created women and the left-handed Twin created men.

They don't look too bright, said the animals. We hope they won't be a problem.

Don't worry, said the Twins, you guys are going to get along just fine.

The animals and the humans and Charm looked around at the world that they had created. Boy, they said, this is as good as it gets. This is one beautiful world.

It's a neat story, isn't it? A little long, but different. Maybe even a little exotic. Sort of like the manure-fired pots or the hand-painted plates or the woven palm hats or the coconuts carved to look like monkey faces or the colourful T-shirts that we buy on vacation.

Souvenirs. Snapshots of a moment. And when the moment has passed, the hats are tossed into closets, the T-shirts are stuffed into drawers, the pots and plates and coconuts are left to gather dust on shelves. Eventually everything is shipped off to a garage sale or slipped into the trash.

As for stories such as the Woman Who Fell from the Sky, well, we listen to them and then we forget them, for amidst the thunder of Christian monologues, they have neither purchase nor place. After all, within the North American paradigm we have a perfectly serviceable creation story.

And it goes like this.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, let there be light, and there was light.

You can't beat the King James version of the Bible for the beauty of the language. But it's the story that captures the imagination. God creates night and day, the sun and the moon, all the creatures of the world, and finally, toward the end of his labours, he creates humans. Man first and then woman. Adam and Eve. And he places everything and everyone in the garden, a perfect world. Not sickness, no death, no hate, no hunger.

And there's only one rule.

Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat. But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it, for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

One rule. Don't break it.

But that's exactly what happens. Adam and Eve break the rule. Doesn't matter how it happens. If you like the orthodox version, you can blame Eve. She eats the apple and brings it back to Adam. Not that Adam says no. A less misogynist reading would blame them both, would chalk up the debacle that followed as an unavoidable mistake. A wrong step. Youthful enthusiasm. A misunderstanding. Wilfulness.

But whatever you wish to call it, the rule has been broken, and that is the end of the garden. God seals it off and places an angel with a fiery sword at the entrance and tosses Adam and Eve into a howling wilderness to fend for themselves, a wilderness in which sickness and death, hate and hunger are their constant companions.

Okay. Two creation stories. One Native, one Christian. The first thing you probably noticed was that I spent more time with the Woman Who Fell From the Sky than I did with Genesis. I'm assuming that most of you have heard of Adam and Eve, but few, I imagine, have ever met Charm. I also used different strategies in the telling of these stories. In the Native story, I tried to recreate an oral storytelling voice and craft the story in terms of a performance for a general audience. In the Christian story, I tried to maintain a sense of rhetorical distance and decorum while organizing the story for a knowledgeable gathering. These strategies colour the stories and suggest values that may be neither inherent nor warranted. In the Native story, the conversational voice tends to highlight the exuberance of the story but diminishes its authority, while the sober voice of the Christian story makes for a formal recitation but creates a sense of veracity.

Basil Johnston, the Anishnabe storyteller, in his essay "How Do We Learn Language?" describes the role of comedy and laughter in stories by reminding us that Native peoples have always loved to laugh: "It is precisely because our tribal stories are comical and evoke laughter that they have never been taken seriously outside the tribe . . . But behind and beneath the comic characters and the comic situations exists the real meaning of the story . . . what the tribe understood about human growth and development."

Of course, none of you would make the mistake of confusing storytelling strategies with value or sophistication of the story. And we know enough about the complexities of culture to avoid the error of imagining animism and polytheism to be no more than primitive versions of monotheism. Don't we?

Nonetheless, the talking animals are a problem.

A theologian might argue that these two creation stories are essentially the same. Each tells about the creation of the world and the appearance of human beings. But a storyteller would tell you that these stories are quite different, for whether you read the Bible as sacred text or secular metaphor, the elements in Genesis create a particular universe governed by a series of hierarchies – God, man, animals, plants – that celebrate law, order, and good government, while in our Native story, the universe is governed by a series of co-operations – Charm, the Twins, animals, humans – that celebrate equality and balance.

In Genesis, all creative power is vested in a single deity who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. The universe begins with his thought, and it is through his actions and only his actions that it comes into being. In the Earth Diver story, and in many other Native creation stories for that matter, deities are generally figures of limited power and persuasion, and the acts of creation and the decisions that affect the world are shared with other characters in the drama.

In Genesis, we begin with a perfect world, but after the Fall, while we gain knowledge, we lose the harmony and safety of the garden and are forced into a chaotic world of harsh landscapes and dangerous shadows.

In our Native story, we begin with water and mud, and, through the good offices of Charm, her twins, and the animals, move by degrees and adjustments from a formless, featureless world to a world that is rich in its diversity, a world that is complex and complete.

Finally, in Genesis, the post-garden world we inherit is decidedly martial in nature, a world at war – God vs. the Devil, humans vs. the elements. Or to put things into corporate parlance, competitive. In our Native story, the world is at peace, and the pivotal concern is not with the ascendancy of good over evil but with the issue of balance.

So here are our choices: a world in which creation is a solitary, individual act or a world in which creation is a shared activity; a world that begins in harmony and slides towards chaos or a world that begins in chaos and moves towards harmony; a world marked by competition or a world determined by co-operation.

And there's the problem.

If we see the world through Adam's eyes, we are necessarily blind to the world that Charm and the Twins and the animals help to create. If we believe one story to be sacred, we must see the other as secular.

You'll recognize this pairing as a dichotomy, the elemental structure of Western society. And cranky old Jacques Derrida notwithstanding, we do love our dichotomies. Rich/poor, white/black, strong/weak, right/wrong, culture/nature, male/female, written/oral, civilized/barbaric, success/failure, individual/communal. We trust easy oppositions. We are suspicious of complexities, distrustful of contradictions, fearful of enigmas.

Enigmas like my father.

I have a couple of old black-and-white pictures of him holding a baby with my mother looking on. He looks young in those photos. And happy. I'm sure he didn't leave because he hated me, just as I'm sure that my mother didn't stay because she loved me. Yet this is the story I continue to tell myself, because it's easy and it contains all my anger, and because, in all the years, in all the tellings, I've honed it sharp enough to cut bone.

If we had a patron story for North America, we could do worse than the one about Alexander the Great, who, when faced with the puzzle of the Gordian knot [a knot fabled to incredibly complex and impossible to untie], solved the problem with nothing more than a strong arm and a sharp sword.

Perhaps this is why we delight in telling stories about heroes battling the odds and the elements, rather than about the magic of seasonal change. Why we relish stories that lionize individuals who start at the bottom and fight their way to the top, rather than stories that frame these forms of competition as varying degrees of insanity. Why we tell our children that life is hard, when we could just as easily tell them that it is sweet.

Is it our nature? Do the stories we tell reflect the world as it truly is, or did we simply start off with the wrong story? Like Silko's witches in the cave, conjuring up things to impress each other.

Making magic.

Making faces.

Making mistakes.

I'm dying to remind myself that the basis of Christian doctrine is rectitude and reward, crime and punishment, even though my partner has warned me that this is probably not a good idea. Tell a story, she told me. Don't preach. Don't try to sound profound. It's unbecoming, and you do it poorly. Don't show them your mind. Show them your imagination.

So am I such an ass as to disregard this good advice and suggest that the stories contained within the matrix of Christianity and the complex of nationalism are responsible for the social, political, and economic problems we face? Am I really arguing that the martial and hierarchical nature of Western religion and Western privilege has fostered stories that encourage egotism and self-interest? Am I suggesting that, if we hope to create a truly civil society, we must first burn all the flags and kill all the gods, because in such a world we could no longer tolerate such weapons of mass destruction?

No, I wouldn't do that.

Though certainly we understand that we clear-cut forests not to enrich the lives of animals but to make profit. We know that we dam(n) rivers not to improve water quality but to create electricity and protect private property. We make race and gender discriminatory markers for no other reason that that we can. And we maintain and tolerate poverty not because we believe adversity makes you s trong, but because we're unwilling to share.

Ah, You've heard all this before, haven't you.

You may have already leaned over to a friend and whispered, Platitude. Platitude, platitude, platitude. Thomas King, the duck-billed platitude.

But give this a thought. What if the creation story in Genesis had featured a flawed deity who was understanding and sympathetic rather than autocratic and rigid? Someone who, in the process of creation, found herself lost from time to time and in need of advice, someone who was willing to accept a little help with the more difficult decisions?

What if the animals had decided on their own names? What is Adam and Eve had simply been admonished for their foolishness?

I love you, God could have said, but I'm not happy with your behaviour. Let's talk this over. Try to do better next time.

What kind of a world might we have created with that kind of story?

Unfortunately, by the time we arrived in the wilderness, broke and homeless, the story of being made in God's image, of living in paradise, of naming the animals must have gone to our heads, for while we weren't the strongest or the fastest, or the fiercest creatures on the planet, we were, certainly, as it turned out, the most arrogant.

God's Chosen People. The Alpha and the Omega. Masters of the Universe.

It is this conceit we continue to elaborate as we fill up our tanks at the gas station, the myth we embrace as we bolt our doors at night, the romance we pursue as we search our guidebooks for just the right phrase. The lie we dangle in front of our appetites as we chase progress to the grave.

Or as Linda McQuaig so delightfully puts it in her book *All You Can Eat: Greed, Lust and the New Capitalism*, "The central character in economics is Homo Economicus, the human prototype, who is pretty much just a walking set of insatiable material desires. He uses his rational abilities to ensure the satisfaction of all his wants, which are key to his motivation. And he isn't considered some weirdo; the whole point of him is that he represents traits basic to all of us – Homo Economicus 'R' Us, as it were."

It was Sir Isaac Newton who said, "To every action there is always opposed and equal reaction." Had he been a writer, he might have simply said, "To every action there is a story."

Take Charm's story, for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to your friends. Turn it into a television movie. Forget it. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.

You've heard it now.

-Thomas King-