

# **The Knowledge Gene: The incredible story of the supergene that gives us humans creativity, by Lynne Kelly**

## **Foreword by David Kanosh**

*“From time immemorial, we who are Tlingit have lived upon these shores. These are the stories of old for these are the stories which go back to the time of legend.”*

I can still hear my grandparents saying those very words before they told me some stories. These stories were often associated with places throughout southeast Alaska. As we rode the ferry from Angoon to Sitka, they'd bring my attention to a location on a nearby island, highlighting features on the landscape, and I knew a story was about to begin.

One of my favourite stories is of Raven fighting his uncle, who had tried killing Raven by various means, and finally causing the tides to rise and summon a storm to kill Raven. The result was a flood, which sent the Tlingit people running up mountains and jumping into canoes to escape or ride out the flood.

My grandparents had taught me these mnemonic techniques to elaborately encode into long-term memory vast amounts of information in a relatively short time. They had taught me other techniques as well, but those techniques are reserved for only a select few. People who are familiar with the memory palace technique and the use of loci will find some similarities with what I had been taught.

The beautifully carved totem poles, wooden carved ceremonial hats and even the wooden carved rattles. They are more than art. They serve a very practical purpose. Each had places or *loci* that I had used to elaborately encode information.

My grandmother picked up a piece of plywood that she had glued pebbles to and said simply, “You will remember.” She then touched each piece as she recounted stories. To my young mind, what she was doing seemed like magic!

I made my own memory boards. As I glued each piece to the plywood, I thought about the stories I would tell with this memory board. I had spent an afternoon just putting on five pebbles! How did my grandmother make it look so easy? Practice. She'd been at this for a while.

My grandparents had smiled. They were happy I was taking such an interest in wanting to learn the stories which had been handed down from our ancestors to us.

I had been taken to some rock cairns which are atop some of the mountains in southeastern Alaska. What was this? Rocks in those rock formations were used to help tell part of a story, and each rock cairn had different stories associated with it.

After being taken to the rock cairns, I had been fascinated by other rock formations from around the world, such as Stonehenge. I had always wondered: who were the storytellers that used Stonehenge? What knowledge was shared? The decades passed but my curiosity about rock formations found around the world never went away.

On numerous boat trips, I have gone with friends to these places where the stories unfolded. I see where Raven and his uncle were fighting it out and causing a flood. The very landscape serves as a memory aid for me to remember this story, but that's just part of it. I don't just tell a story; I act it out. I dance it. When I'm alone, I sing it.

I stand upon the land where my ancestors have stood. I stand on the land where untold numbers of storytellers have stood. I take in the view of the landscape. I close my eyes for a moment as the story becomes alive again within me. It's now time to bring that story out.

I open my eyes. I look at my audience. I echo the words which were spoken to me by my grandparents so long ago: *'From time immemorial, we who are Tlingit have lived upon the shores . . .'*

The story begins. The land is my stage. Who am I? I am Raven fighting his uncle. I am Raven's uncle fighting Raven. I am the Tlingit people running up the mountain to escape the flood. I am the Tlingit people jumping into canoes to ride out the flood.

Dr Lynne Kelly's book *The Memory Code* had been brought to my attention by Josh Houston at a potluck before a meeting. As Josh explained what the book was about, my curiosity was becoming stronger and stronger. The moment Josh said 'Stonehenge', I had to find out more. That was it. I had to buy the book.

As I read this book, I stood up not a few times, saying, 'Yes! Yes!' I cried a few times. I've never really read anything written about our people. Not in English, anyway. She was writing about orality, the manner by which orally based traditions are used to memorize vast amounts of information in a relatively short amount of time. I had paused quite a few times, reflecting on everything which my grandparents had taught me.

I had shared information with anthropologists before about what I know but none of them had ever asked how I had so elaborately encoded what I do know into long-term memory. I had been impressed with what Dr Kelly had written about. I added her other books to my

collection. *The Memory Code, Memory Craft and Songlines: The power and promise*. Was that it? Had I reached the end of the journey? Far from it.

I have shared about the culture of my people, the Tlingit, and some of the various mnemonic devices with Dr Kelly. This has been a learning journey for both of us. It's a wonderful journey. As much as I have been a teacher, I've also been a student. There is so much to learn. That is the magic of it! Our minds do not have a 'use-by date'.

Dr Kelly has invited you and me to be a part of the journey ahead. The journey continues. The story continues.

There's still a bit of magic in me. I am Raven flying up to the sky. I am every Tlingit storyteller who has ever lived. I am the student who is eager to learn. I call the end back to the beginning!

David Kanosh

**Yook̄is'kookéik**

Tlingit Elder and storyteller.