People have been studying, teaching, and learning in Gordon Head, where the University of Victoria now stands, for millennia. For the Coast and Straits Salish peoples, transmitting knowledge was central to their existence – understanding intimately the world around them was essential for the good life they enjoyed.

Despite the efforts of residential schools to obliterate that understanding, it has been transmitted across generations. It is concerned with knowledge about local places, land, plants, forest animals, and water life, the kinds of understandings that can only come from a sustained, intimate, and respectful connection to the land. It provides reflections on those larger questions that invariably perplex human beings: where do we come from, what is the meaning of life, how do we relate to nature, what constitutes justice, how do we resolve differences, treat ailments, and meet spiritual needs. The individuals and families who mastered such knowledge, the elders of whatever age, were revered, as they are to this day. Their insights should be reflected upon, particularly by people who speed by or who consume rather than engage the natural world they are given in trust.

But perhaps those of us who do not come from Indigenous backgrounds could learn most from their efforts to create holistic understandings of life. One should not impose impossible standards on all Indigenous people and expect that they all adhered perfectly to how they said they wanted to live. One must respect, though, the way in which so many, amid the hardships of the last 170 years, have sought to do so. Their constancy is impressive, their vision salutary. We can also learn from the awe evident within Indigenous knowledge, the recognition that human beings seek, and must seek, to understand so much more than they already know, so much that ultimately may not be knowable. At the very least, it will help us to become less certain about what we think we know.

Until recent years, Indigenous knowledge was not widely known, partly as a result of needing to resist efforts to obliterate it and partly because of the way it was pushed aside as settlement occurred. Fortunately, the situation is changing and Indigenous people are generously sharing more of their knowledge – but that is a matter for later chapters, much later chapters ...