

**MY PACIFIC EPIPHANY**  
*by Andrew James Smith*

August 18, 2017

*This is an excerpt from a talk I gave at Bridges Waterloo 2017, entitled "The Discovery and Application of the Protogon's Spiral".<sup>1</sup>*

## MY PACIFIC EPIPHANY

*by Andrew James Smith*

My twenty-one-foot-long triptych, *The Protogon Shift*, was on display at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery concurrently during my talk. I signed the painting with my circular, Arabesque signature, devised more than 30 years ago (so the Geraldine Davis Gallery in Toronto could sell my artwork vertically or horizontally). It reads "Andrew".



Necessary to creating this artwork was my postponing my second semester at the University of Hawaii. Let me explain. I accepted an offer to sail around the South Pacific on a fifty-five-foot ketch, the *Jessica*. The sailboat was designed by John G. Alden and captained by Stafford-Ames Morse. It was a beautiful boat and a beautiful experience—one of the highlights of my life.

After the first twenty-one days at sea, we dropped anchor in a small bay the other side of the island from Pago Pago in American Samoa. The three of us left the boat and went separately to live with different families in a small village composed of about a dozen huts. The huts were thatch-roofed with pebble floors covered with woven palm mats to sleep on beneath mosquito netting, and no walls. The village also didn't have any currency or employment, and no strife that I observed. The only appliances around were Coleman lanterns in the centre of each hut. The food was abundant, as was the happiness. All clothing was casual—nudity mostly. The natives showed me how to make Tapa cloth. They had each taken a remarkable enjoyment in giving. My stay lasted for only a couple weeks but caused me to reevaluate my Protestant work ethic and political world views. (Sadly, I recently Googled the village and, if I pinpointed the location correctly, it seems to have been replaced by a shopping mall!)



We sailed through the Cook Islands, and eventually parted ways in Papeete, Tahiti. That was 1964; I was nineteen—and became a man. Skip to 1968. After four years of art school in the Bay Area, I ventured back home to set up a studio in my parents' garage. Soon, an unfortunate incident prompted me to leave. At a loss as to what to do next, I hiked up the hill to camp atop Mount Madonna in the Santa Cruz mountains, to contemplate it all.

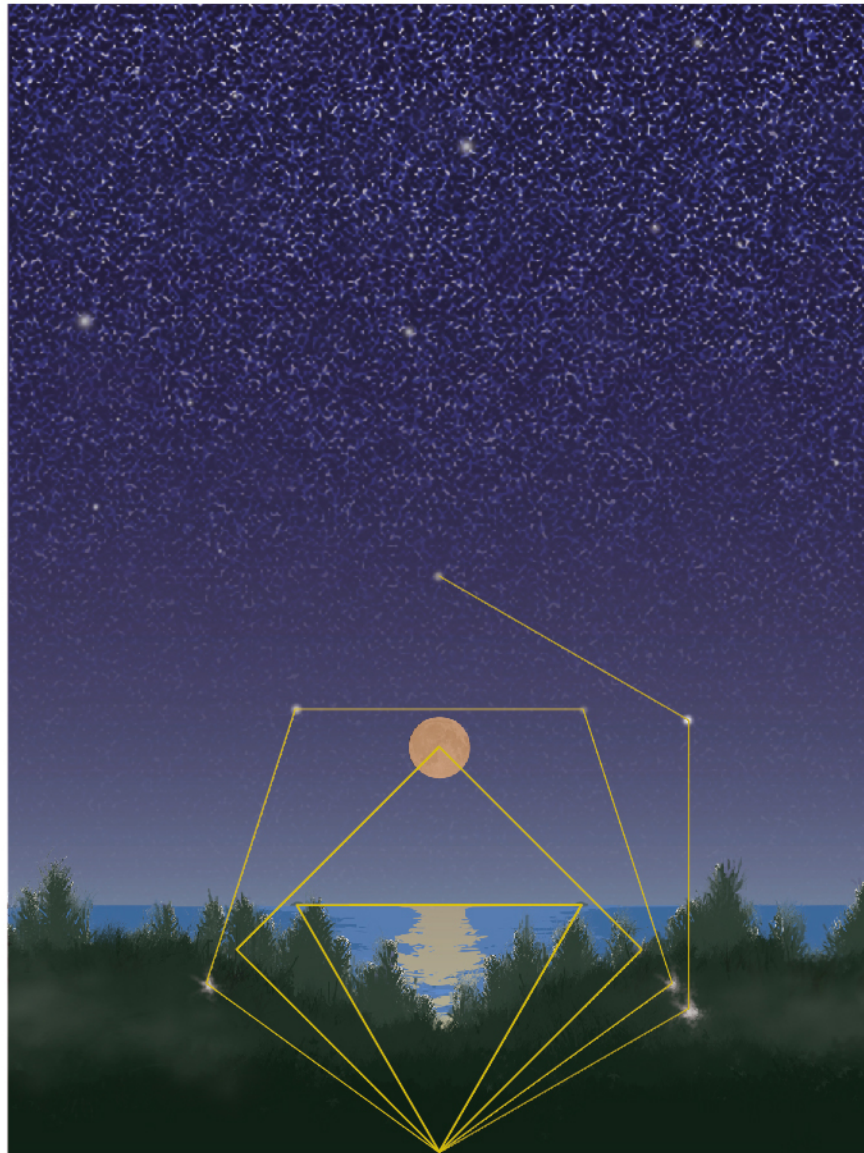


I took a backpack containing a three-ringed binder holding blue-lined paper and pencils, and a canteen plus a bag of flour mixed with baking powder. As I was taught by my dad (a righteous and religious man), if my inner dialogue were ever to start driving me crazy, I should try humming, chanting, praying, speaking-in-tongues, singing—or anything else so as to drown out the voice. (Apparently, you can't speak to yourself in your mother tongue while singing.) Dad knew what he was talking about. He survived the Second World War and was also a Lieutenant Major in the Korean War, enduring thirty-three months in a Chinese POW camp. (He was awarded a Bronze Star with 'V' for valour.) Then, upon returning home, he tended to my mother for the next forty years as she succumbed to MS. I often found him praying. His theory overlooked one thing though: when you're in the depths of depression, you want to wallow in it.

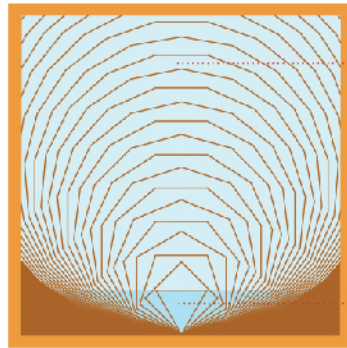
In a clearing on the hillside beneath a small forest, I made a ring of rocks in which I built a fire. Before retiring, I mixed the contents of my bag with water from my canteen into a dough. I placed lumps of it on the rocks so I could awake to biscuits in the morning. Still sad, I drifted asleep beneath the stars.

Then it happened. The crunching of leaves, snapping of twigs. Footsteps. Not human ones. Coming out of the forest approaching my campfire was an animal. Maybe a dog, wolf, or worse. Maybe it was a bobcat, or maybe even a bear. I doubt it was attracted by my sobbing—more likely by my baking. I froze in a prenatal position and suppressed my whimpering. I contemplated running but figured I would be too slow. I contemplated screaming, to try and frighten it away, but figured that might antagonize an animal which had merely been curious. I never got a glimpse of the animal but, by the time it reached my campfire, in my mind it was huge. I was hoping it came for my biscuits. When I heard no confirmation, I thought to myself: "Great, a carnivore!". But by then, I didn't care anymore. I just hoped it would be painless; mentally I was already prepared to die.

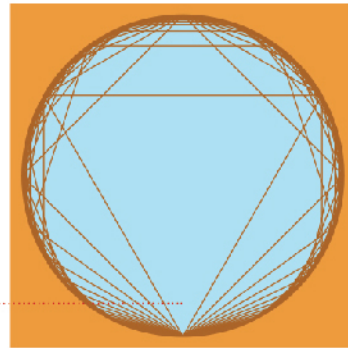
The beast sniffed all the way up my leg to my face. Just when I expected to feel excruciating pain, it licked my cheek—whether to sample me or offer me encouragement. Then it strolled back up the hill and disappeared into the woods. I was paralysed until morning; I don't think I slept a minute. As the sun rose over the mountain, I finally sat up, plucked the biscuits off the rocks (now cold but baked), and chewed. Savouring my cooking while overlooking the Pacific Ocean, I remembered the life that had almost ended. Imagining I could see Hawaii on the horizon to my right and Tahiti on my left, I triangulated them with my current position. And then I did likewise with my home, my school, and the moon. Up and down the coast from San Francisco to L.A., locations connected with stars unfolded into an infinitely large circle.



It was then and there: I imagined the first of my organized polygon arrangements. (Polygon: a flat shape constrained by straight lines.) Then, in something like an out-of-body experience, I felt I was floating above the Pacific Ocean, looking down on this design—in a way where I could see all the polygon shapes sharing the same circumference of the circle.



*"Polygons with a Point in Common,  
all Sides being Equal."*



*"Polygons with a Point in Common,  
and the Same Circumference."*

At that moment, the rush of possibilities set upon me like a compounded epiphany, an electrocution of ideas, which I was going to spend more than two decades unravelling. By the end of the 1970s, on and off, casually but yet compulsively, I would produce nearly three hundred related variations (all drawn with pencil on paper). Incidentally, the very first sketch I made in the notebook on blue-lined paper was one that I overlooked, until 2005. Upon discovering it comprised a unique spiral, I have been making paintings and sculptures related to it for the last dozen years. That spiral is the reason why I wrote an academic paper, which in turn prompted me to write this. What caused me to stumble across the spiral itself is another story...

Photograph of the *Jessica* courtesy of captain Stafford-Ames Morse; other artwork copyrighted by Andrew James Smith, 2017.

[1] Swart, Séquin and Fenyvesi, *Bridges Waterloo Conference Proceedings*, Tesselations Publishing, U.S.A. (2017), pp. 519–522.

*The author, Andrew James Smith is an artist, born and raised in California,  
who happens to have been passing through Canada, for the last fifty years.*