Over 2,500 years ago, in the Greek territory of Ionia, lived a man named Thales. Today, Thales is recognized by such titles as the world’s first philosopher, the father of philosophy, the founder of philosophy, and, according to Aristotle, “the founder of Ionian natural philosophy.” Thales was born in the town of Miletus and has forever left his imprint on the evolution of human thought. His contributions were so profound during his time that he was canonized as the “Wisest of the Seven Sages of Greece” by the sages themselves. It is to Thales that history attributes the proverb “Know thyself.”

Most of what we know about Thales comes from the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Hermippus, Herodotus, Hieronymus, Hippias, Eudemus, and others. Thales was an original thinker who had a keen understanding of the myths of oral history long ago. At the same time, he was a scientist, astronomer, mathematician, teacher, author, politician, and a seer who could forecast future events. According to some accounts, he was the first to study astronomy, to predict eclipses of the sun, and to fix solstices.
Thales was born into a world filled with the so-called mythologies and gods that were recorded in the first writings of humankind. By closely observing nature, Thales fashioned a synthesis of mythology and natural science. Desiring to grasp the *first cause* of all things, Thales searched for a unifying hypothesis for the creation and sustenance of things, both visible and invisible. This led him to the startling revelation that all things come from water, that the Earth floats on water, that water is the material constituent of all things, and that water is the cause of earthquakes. According to Plutarch's Miscellanies Vol. III:

*Thales the Milesian doth affirm that water is the principle whence all things in the universe spring... He pronounced that all things had their original from water, and into water all things are resolved. His first reason was, that whatsoever was the prolific seed of all animals was a principle, and that is moist; so it is probable that all things receive their original from humidity. His second reason was that all plants are nourished and fructified by that thing which is moist, of which being deprived they wither away. Thirdly, that the fire of which the sun and stars are made is nourished by water exhalations—yea, and the world itself.*

Today, we know that all life and its DNA *springs from water*, that continental plates float and circulate the water beneath them, and that water is a major explosive force in volcanoes and earthquakes. Thus, Thales was correct on that note. In the past decade, scientists have determined that our sun and other stars in the universe require the presence of interstellar water to keep them from overheating during their birth. Also, our sun *exhales* water in the form of superheated steam as a way of balancing its heat. Thus, we have full scientific corroboration of Thales’ observations of 2,500 years ago.
From information gathered about Thales, history has found him to be a mysterious man who apparently introduced many new ideas and concepts that cannot be found anywhere before his time. Besides teaching people about water, he expressed practical knowledge of how the world worked through his mathematics, astronomy, and engineering. As Plutarch wrote in his *Lives*, "Upon the whole, Thales seems to have been the only philosopher who then carried his speculations beyond things in common use, while the rest of the wise men maintained their character by rules for social life." In other words, Thales did not allow social pressure or rules to sway his sense of self and the revelation of his discoveries.

One example of how Thales challenged society was his boldly informing the natives of Miletus that the Sun and stars, which were then worshiped as gods, were merely gaseous balls of fire. Through such revelations, Thales is credited with ushering in a new era of Greek thought by daring to give natural explanations for cosmic complexities and events. Following his lead, later Ionian philosophers sought in physics the natural causes of certain incidents and sought in philosophy a natural theory of all existence.

As is the case with many original thinkers who share their thoughts, Thales was held to a considerable degree of ridicule. According to records, he counteracted his disbelievers by doing two things that, even to this day, remain inexplicable. First, he predicted the day and time of a solar eclipse in the year 585 B.C. Modern scientists have since researched this event, and agree that a solar eclipse did occur on May 28, 585 B.C. and, more importantly, that it was visible in Ionia. How Thales was able to make this prediction remains a mystery since no theory for predicting a solar eclipse existed in his time—never mind his ability to
factor in the position of its time and visibility according to geographic latitude.

Secondly, in a story passed down to us by Aristotle, Thales found himself publicly humiliated for spouting thoughts that had little practical use in the day-to-day activities of humankind. Understanding humankind’s materialistic tendencies to be impressed by money, Thales demonstrated how he could easily acquire wealth. This demonstration applied his knowledge of astronomy, seasonal weather, and, of course, water to foretell a large harvest of olives in the countryside surrounding Miletus. Due to drought, the region’s olive harvest had been dismal for years. Therefore, Thales bought all the olive presses he could afford because people were willing to sell them at low prices. When his predicted rains produced a bountiful olive harvest, Thales made a huge profit by renting the presses. Needless to say, after these two events, Thales’ stature as a man who knew what he was talking about was greatly elevated.

Thales’ other accomplishments included his advising Milesian sailors to use the starry constellation known as the Little Bear (also called Ursa Minor or the Little Dipper) as a navigational aide. He further helped sailors by developing a method of measuring the distance of ships out to sea. And on an even loftier note, Thales is credited with introducing geometry to Greece. It is believed that Thales gave us the concepts that the circle is bisected by its diameter, that the base angles of an isosceles triangle are equal, and that vertically opposed angles are equal. Since Thales is credited as being the world’s first philosopher, it naturally follows that he exerted a considerable degree of influence on many of the Greek philosophers and writers who succeeded him, including Pythagoras, Anaximander, Socrates, Euripides, Plato, and Aristotle.
On another note, we find passages in the tragedies of Euripides about the healing properties of the sea and how its waters could cure humankind of all its ills. Of course, the most important thought left to us by Thales is that all things exist because of water. Our knowledge of this is based on Aristotle's passages in the *Metaphysics* crediting Thales with saying that water is the material constituent of all things. This thought reaffirms the earliest writings of humankind (from sources around the world) expressing that, in the beginning, there existed a water source or a watery mist or abyss from which all things were created. For instance, *Old Testament* writings tell a similar story about the Earth floating on water:

> The Lord's is the Earth and its entirety, the world and all that dwells therein. For He hath founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters.¹

Thales' idea that the Earth floats upon water is not that far-fetched. The more we learn about water, the more we realize that it is present in all places—even on our burning Sun and in the emptiness of outer space, albeit in its very basic form. What takes this thought one step further is the indication that Thales also looked upon water as a remote ancestor. In other words, he considered water to be directly related to every human and every living entity that ever existed. This idea of water being related to every human and every living thing cannot be overlooked. For thinking of water as an ancestor indicates a belief that water is a living being.

Further support for this concept of a fluid-like substance permeating all things was provided by the mathematician Helmut, who suggested in the 1800’s that there was a *universal fluid* pervading all of nature and it was not corporeal, but instead a pure vitalizing form of spirit that continuously flows through all bodies. Also, we learn that
Thales thought of water as both a principle and an element, meaning that the water we see, drink, swim in, and otherwise use in this physical reality also has a basis in realms beyond the senses. According to Plutarch, Anaximander (c. 611-547 B.C. and thought to have been a follower of Thales) "assigns the principle of all things to the Infinite, from whence all things flow, and into the same are corrupted; hence, it is that infinite worlds are framed, and those vanish again into that whence they have their original." This concept of all things flowing from an infinite source was also put forth by another Greek philosopher, Heraclitus (c. 540-480 B.C.).

Both of these philosophers assigned the principle of all things to a fluid of the Infinite, and they believed that everything flows, from which it follows that one cannot step twice in the same river. It is curious to find that, at about the same time, the Buddha (c. 563~483 B.C.) was setting forth a similar philosophy through his teachings in Asia. How appropriate it is for the name Buddha to have the Sanskrit meaning of awakened.

The fact that Thales, Heraclitus, Zoroaster, Confucius, Pythagoras, and Buddha provided life-altering philosophical or religious beliefs and all lived at about the same time in history leaves open the possibility of their meeting or hearing news of each other. Perhaps their traveling devotees crossed paths and shared the teachings of their respective teachers. Another interesting note is that these great thinkers all lived along the 35th parallel of the Northern Hemisphere.

Socrates (470-399 B.C.) expanded on Heraclitus' thought of all things flowing by teaching that all things flowed from ideas originating in a source that was unseen in this reality. This concept of flowing was further elaborated by Plato (428-347 B.C.), who created his academy as a center of learning to carry on the teachings of his teacher, Socrates. It is
interesting to note that Plato's school was in a grove named Academus. And, through the Academus grove flowed a gurgling stream of spring water. With a little imagination, we can easily envision the great philosophers sitting in the grove near the gurgling stream while discussing Thales's teachings relative to water. Perhaps they even heard spirit voices coming forth from the stream.

Of course, from the grove Academus where Plato taught, we have the origin of the words *academic* and *academia*. What Thales taught about the water-based nature of this reality during his lifetime seems to be reappearing in our time, except in a slightly different fashion. The belief that science will provide us with all the answers of our physical existence is slowly but surely yielding to the belief that science will help lead us to the spiritual source of our existence.

The world of human thought and belief is once again returning to the search for the spiritual within nature. People from all walks of life are once again exploring the presence of something Divine in nature’s complexity. Truly, there is great wonder in the ongoing creation and sustenance of this water world we live in. Each day, more people awaken to the wonder of living within this creation and of sharing time with other life forms made manifest through the mysterious and creative energies of water.

References