



# Ground Rules

**Our educational mission is to  
produce human beings who are  
at home in their place, their  
environment, their world.**

OSCAR KAWAGLEY

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# FACULTY INTENSIVE

## Day One

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On that first morning we met in our shared campus library, a space we were all familiar with and where we had met many times before. Most of us knew each other at least a little bit, and everyone knew Libby. Over coffee and yoghurt and fruit, the sixteen participants stashed their jackets, arranged their bookbags and computers, filled out the pre-test surveys, and chatted comfortably amongst themselves. So far this was all pretty standard for an academic gathering.

Then Libby introduced Aleut educator Ilarion (Larry) Mercurieff and Yup'ik Elder Angayuqaq (Oscar) Kawagley, who would serve as our guides and teachers for the week. From this point forward, very little would be standard. We were going off the grid, following our Native teachers down trails unfamiliar to most of us.

The very first thing we did was stop talking. We opened that first day, as we would each day thereafter, with a period of silence, a time when we would all be together in the same space in an unstructured way without speaking to each other. "Use this time for inner reflection," we suggested. "Connect with the natural world outside our windows. Center yourself. Do whatever you want; just do it in silence."

There was a little nervous laughter at first, but everyone quickly settled in. People refilled their coffee cups, strolled around the room, looked out the windows towards the Science building, the

Administration building, and Mosquito Lake off in the distance. Some stretched, others sat quietly, a few closed their eyes. After about ten minutes, Ilarion called the silence to a close, and we gathered our chairs into a large circle to begin.

### Sample Agenda

Pre-testing

Opening Ceremonies

Code of Conduct

Place-based Learning

Way of the Real Human Being

Visual Language and Learning

Story-telling

Reflection

Group Work

Critical Incident Questionnaire

Ilarion introduced the week ahead. "For months, we've been trying to figure out how to create as authentic an experience as possible, to immerse you in some of these traditional Alaska Native ways of teaching and learning. Well, this," he gestured to our circle, "is one of them. In Alaska Native cultures, everything is viewed in a cyclical nature, and everything is created with the circle in mind. I'm generalizing here because each culture might have a little bit different symbology, but they hold many things in common. And one is as we sit here, together, in this circle, we are sitting here as equals. No one is more or less than any other person."

Here he paused and, establishing a discourse rhythm that would become common throughout the week, repeated himself with renewed emphasis. “There’s no one more or less. We are all completely equal.”

He paused again before continuing. “You may notice throughout this week that Oscar and I will be speaking without notes. I learned this lesson from Howard Luke, a respected Elder of the Interior. He said anybody who has to get up in front of a group of people and speak from a piece of paper has no business being up there! Well, I took that to heart. Up until then I was trying to function within the Western educational tradition. I had graduated from the University of Washington, and they always taught you to write it down, all the time. But when I listened to Howard and dropped that piece of paper, I felt a dramatic shift actually occur inside of me. I slipped from the mind into the heart.”

He looked around at all the academic faces in the circle and issued the first ground rule for the week. “Throughout this whole experience, as part of the immersion, no one is to use any pen or paper or write anything down at any time. No computers, no cell phones. *You* are going to learn the way *we* learned growing up.”

The intent here was that participants would take away from the experience only what they had internalized and could remember from the inside, not what they could capture on their screens or note to themselves on their legal pads. In the embodied, direct, oral and visual style of learning common to most indigenous cultures, there is no writing it down. Instead, you pay keen attention, listen closely and deeply, emulate the wisest and most experienced among you, learn by doing, and take what you learn so deeply into yourself that it becomes part of your identity.

“We will also move at a slower pace,” he promised. “One that is more at one with the rhythms of nature. This is a route to connectedness, which will be a central theme throughout the week.”

## BACKGROUND

# Alaska's Native Peoples

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Even though our faculty members all live in Alaska, we can't take it for granted that they share a common knowledge about Alaska's Native peoples or a common understanding of the cultural context in which we live and work. These topics are not widely known, even within the state. Readers from outside Alaska are likely to know even less about the peoples and cultures we are trying to represent. For these reasons, a little background may be helpful.

In 2007 and 2008, a group of faculty and community members created a book to provide a foundation for these conversations. Originally titled *Do Alaska Native People Get Free Medical Care?*, the book is now available from the University of Alaska Press as *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues*. It provides brief answers to frequently asked questions about culture, identity, subsistence, the effects of colonialism, the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, and other issues and events of importance to understanding Alaska's Native peoples. Each chapter ends with a list of recommended readings and resources for further investigation of these complicated and sometimes contentious topics. We posted it on our website and gave free copies to both faculty members and students as part our shared Books of the Year program in 2008 and 2009.

It is beyond the scope of this handbook to provide the detailed histories and cultural analyses that are the true context for most of this work. But as a brief introduction, we have adapted the following from *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues*.

### **Who are Alaska's Native peoples?**

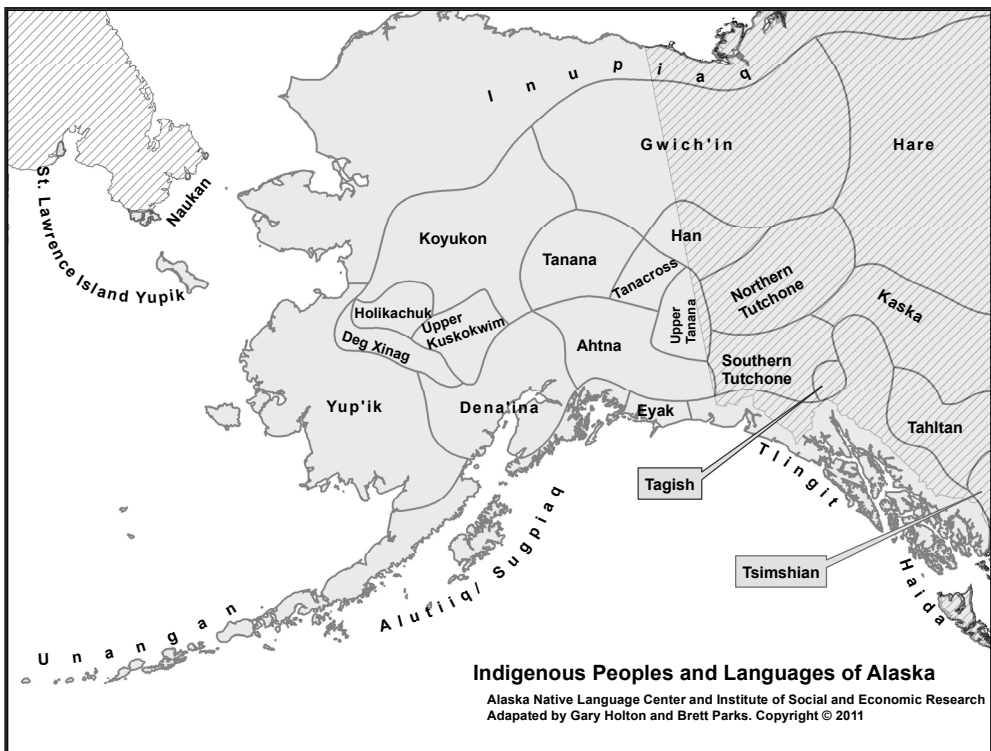
We use the term Alaska Native to refer to peoples that are indigenous to the lands and waters encompassed by the state of Alaska. They are not, as the term implies, a single entity; rather they belong to several major cultural groups, each inhabiting lands and waters their ancestors have occupied for thousands of years:

- Inupiaq in the Arctic;
- Yupiaq in Southwestern Alaska;
- Unangan/Aleut in the Aleutian Chain and the Pribilof Islands;
- Athabascan in the interior and southcentral regions of the state;
- Sugpiaq and Eyak in the lower southcentral region, Kenai Peninsula, and Kodiak Island; and
- Haida, Tlingit, Tsimshian in Southeastern Alaska.

Each culture is distinct, with complex kinship structures, highly developed subsistence hunting and gathering practices and technologies, and unique and varied languages, belief systems, art, music, storytelling, spirituality, and dance traditions, among many other attributes. What they have in common are deeply ingrained values such as respecting Elders, valuing community over individuality, and showing reverence and respect for fish, wildlife, and the land and waters upon which life depends.

Alaska Native people once used and occupied virtually all inhabitable land in the 586,412 square mile terrain we now call Alaska. After passage of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) in 1971, they can legally claim only forty-four million acres. Economic pressures have caused many to move to urban areas such as Anchorage or Fairbanks where opportunities for jobs and education are greater. Many others still live in small rural communities, off the road system and accessible only by air or boat. In the villages, most people combine some form of cash economy with subsistence harvesting of fish, wildlife, and wild plants. Many live in poverty, with poor access to health and dental care and high prices for fuel and processed foods.

The 2010 Census counted 104,871 Alaska Native and American Indian people living in Alaska, 14.8% of the total population of the state (710,231). An additional 33,441 Alaskans identified themselves as multi-racial with at least one part being Alaska Native or American Indian. As recently as 1930, Alaska Native people are estimated to have accounted for more than half of Alaska's population. Today, the percentage is less than twenty. Influxes of non-Native people after World War II, during the oilfield boom of the 1970s, and in recent years have turned Alaska's Native peoples into a minority on their traditional homelands.



## CODE OF CONDUCT

# Alaska Native Discourse Values

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On a whiteboard, we posted some discourse values that most Alaska Native cultures hold in common. With the group's agreement, they would form our code of conduct for the week.

- Treat each other with respect.
- Keep in mind that everyone has their own truth.
- Listen without agenda.
- Be polite, courteous, and thoughtful.
- Refrain from interruptions.
- Affirm other speakers.
- Do not voice disagreement or use violent words; instead, say something positive about the previous speaker and then simply add your own thoughts.
- Respect privacy: everything shared in confidence needs to be kept in confidence.
- Be supportive of each other.

These traditional values and rules, grounded in common sense and respect, nurture a safe and comfortable discourse environment in which individuals may speak confidently, knowing they will be respected rather than criticized, attacked, or demeaned. Listeners get the benefit of full access to each other's intelligence. Group knowledge grows, yielding greater wisdom and strength to deal with whatever issues or challenges are before the community.

"I am part of a generation that had a fully intact traditional upbringing," said Ilarion. "When we share, we listen without interruption. It has been my experience that in Western discourse no one really listens to anyone else; everyone is too busy planning their own response. Here, we hope that won't happen. There will be no talking over someone at any time. We're simply going to listen without agenda. It's a different way of listening. Then when you respond, it can be authentic. It can come spontaneously, not from the head but from the heart."



**Ilarion Merculieff** was born on the Pribilof Island of St. Paul, raised in a traditional Aleut community, and given the traditional name *Kuuyux* by an Elder. At the age of four, he was chosen by the Elders to serve as a bridge between traditional Aleut culture and the outside world. He graduated from the University of Washington, having established the first indigenous student education program there. Ilarion has served Aleut and other indigenous peoples over a thirty-five year career devoted to the environment, human rights, community wellness, economic development, and cultural enhancement. He has held leadership positions with a wide range of organizations, including the Aleut Corporation,

the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council, the Alaska Native Science Commission, and the Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development. Organizations he co-founded and/or co-directed include the Indigenous Peoples' Council for Marine Mammals, the Alaska Oceans Network, the International Bering Sea Forum, the Bering Sea Council of Elders, and the Science Working Group for Snowchange.

## The Way of the Real Human Being

Ilarion Merculieff

One day when I was about five years old, I went out with my grandfather before sunrise to pray near the shore of the Bering Sea. It was an incredibly beautiful day, magical, with sunshine and no wind. As we walked home along the beach, our feet fell into a slow rhythmic pace along the dark-colored sands. Small waves crested in rapid succession. We could hear the seagulls calling and the seals bellowing in a distant rookery. The sea air smelled fresh, and everything was alive and intense. The sky and sea were expansive and a myriad of blue hues. I could see the horizon for a hundred and eighty degrees.

“Oh I love this day!” I proclaimed. “It is really good!”

“*Anaan eestahnaan Laikaiyax,*” my grandfather said softly. “*Tututhaax.*”

Even as a five-year-old child I understood what he was saying. He was teaching me how to be a real human being through one of the age-old ways that Unungan (Aleut) people have used to survive and thrive along the Bering Sea for ten thousand years. He was saying that words are unnecessary, that they diminish the fullness of meaningful human experience. He was telling me to stop talking and to experience the world around me without words.



St. Paul Island, where I was born and raised, is one of five islands in the archipelago known as the Pribilofs. It is a magical and mystical place, a windswept outpost of volcanic rock twelve miles long and five miles wide, in the middle of the Bering Sea, about 300 air miles west of the mainland of Alaska and 800 miles from Anchorage. My people—the Aleut people—have lived in and along the Bering Sea for ten thousand years, and we live there still. In my childhood, St. Paul was home to some 1.4 million fur seals, 2.5 million seabirds, a thousand reindeer, an untold number of arctic foxes, and six hundred Aleut people, including those in our sister village of St. George, about forty miles away by boat.

I was blessed to have a fully traditional upbringing, by which I mean I was raised by my entire village in the ways of the real human being. I was always welcomed into everyone's home and treated as if I were a member of the family. I was never scolded for anything and had the freedom to roam the island anytime day or night without restriction. Basically, I was free to explore my world inside and out without interference by adults. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the agreement of my parents. Most children in the village were raised this way.

Between the ages of four and six, I lived with Papa (my grandfather, Paul Mercurieff) twenty-four hours a day, as was the custom at that time. I went to work with him, hunted with him, prayed with him, slept with him. This is a tradition that goes a long ways back. It was a way for my grandfather to get to know me and for me to get to know my grandfather.

At the same age, I was invited into many circles within the village. The Elders would invite me to go camping with them, and I would hear their stories. The men would take me out hunting and fishing. The women would take me berry-picking and later invite me to be with them while they prepared and cooked our wild foods. The villagers were my teachers. They taught me what they did, and they shared what they knew.

I found my *Aachaa*\* at the age of five. An *Aachaa* relationship develops between an older person and a child based on energetic and spiritual connections rather than family ties. *Aachaa* relationships are not proscribed or planned; they just happen. When that feeling of special connection occurs, the two become *aachaas* and call each other "*Aachaa*."

The word can't begin to encapsulate the relationship. Attempts to define it only diminish it. But for the next eight years of my childhood, my *Aachaa* took me under his wing. He took me out hunting and fishing with him. We hunted Steller sea lions, eider ducks, and whatever other migratory ducks came through. We fished for halibut. The men in my village were consummate hunters and fishers.

From him, through our experiences together, I learned much of what I know about relationship and reciprocity, the Aleut ethics and values of sharing, my relationship to myself and the natural world, and what it means to be an Aleut and a man.

The whole time he had me under his wing, my *Aachaa* spoke no more than about two hundred words to me. He gave no verbal instructions or explanations; he did not encourage me to ask questions. We were together in silence most of the time. He expected me to watch, listen, and learn on my own, using my inherent intelligence.

This is typical of our people. Words are not only superfluous, but they also constrain our intelligence. Adults never presumed any limitation to my intelligence or ability to learn, nor tried to tell me what I should learn. Instead, they provided learning opportunities. The adult's responsibility was simply to create a big open space in which the young one can learn.

\* A traditional mentor, pronounced "ah-cha"

The beauty and deep wisdom of that kind of learning is that it allowed me to reach my maximum potential. What I learned depended totally upon my own interests, initiative, experiences, interpretations, discernment, and intelligence. Western-cultured adults often begin with fixed ideas about what children should and should not know. They teach to that presumed and predetermined standard of knowledge, sometimes at the expense of the child's creativity, sense of self, and natural ability to learn on his or her own.

By contrast, nothing was held back from me. Anything I wanted to do, learn, or know, I could, without concern about my age. The only times adults intervened were for reasons of safety. The elders would gauge their responses by the questions I asked. They would answer at a level I could understand.

In Western culture, we are taught to give the "right" answers, or at least try to. And the "right" answers, conveniently, are what they told you they are, things you have to learn by rote. That's a reverse from the way I was raised. None of the things I learned about being Aleut came from books, and there were no wrong answers, only better or different ones. The Aleut learning process helped me to think creatively and critically, without judgment...something that has helped me immensely in my life and career.

Aleut people know that human intelligence exists and operates not simply in the mind but in the body and spirit as well. We learn with all of our senses: hearing, feeling, smelling, intuition, gut responses, thinking, emotions, "heart sense," and body signals. Intelligence is a system, synthesizing information from both sensory and non-sensory inputs. Underneath is a knowing which is profoundly connected to All That Is. Ultimately, this is the basis for our spirituality. The way of a real human being is to understand and feel this connection.

Pribilof Aleuts are People of the Sea Lion. Steller sea lions are as central to our way of life as bowheads are to the Inupiat and bison were to the Plains Indians. They have provided for us through good and hard times. In return, we preserve their habitat from disruption and protect them from wanton killing. We honor each one we kill by eating or using every possible part of the body and sharing the animal with as many families as possible.

As young hunters, we would sit on volcanic basalt boulders next to the sea for six, seven, even ten hours at a stretch, waiting for a sea lion to come by. We learned to be quiet inside and out and to pay attention to everything going on around us. Conversation was a distraction we could not afford. It might prevent us from sensing the sea lion out in the water, five or even ten miles away.

I sat in silence with my *Aachaa* and the other hunters for hours. I watched the sea, listening to the waves and feeling the rhythm of the ocean. Sheww, sheww, sheww. Our island is called the Birthplace of the Winds. I listened to the rhythm of the winds. I listened to the seals barking along the beach. I breathed deeply in the fresh sea air. The sun might shine through the clouds. Everything around me would be moving. Everything would be alive.

Sometimes, I let the rhythm of the wind and the waves and sounds of boisterous seals lull me into a serene stupor. The background of sound in a wild environment is full of rhythm and redundancy; it can easily carry you away into a dreamlike state. Once in a while I might even doze off, having been up since three in the morning to be at the shore by six for a full day of hunting that typically lasted late into the afternoon. After all I was only five years old.

But I noticed that the men never once dozed off or fell into daydreaming. Their awareness never slipped for a second. And then suddenly, a hunter would proclaim, "*Cowax ukukohx!*" A sea lion is coming!

Instantly, without anyone pointing, all the men would look to the same spot out in the open Bering Sea. Uncannily, the hunters would know a sea lion was coming even before anyone could physically see it. To a child my age, this seemed truly magical.

I came to understand it through an experience that at first might seem unrelated. About six miles from my village is a place called Tolstoi where tens of thousands of sea birds nest on cliff ledges of rugged volcanic rock and raise their young on outcrops overlooking the sea. There are many different kinds of birds filling many different niches. Puffins have burrows near the top of the cliff. Kittiwakes make nests of tundra grass on the main body. Murres lay their eggs on the bare rock. Cormorants prefer the promontories sticking out from edges of the cliff face. Auklets nest in crevices underneath basalt boulders at the base.

Beginning at age six, I made regular trips to Tolstoi, leaving the village in the late night darkness so that I could be at the cliff side before sunrise when the seabirds stirred. I would later learn names for their forage: sand lance, tiny sea creatures called *copepods*, and oil-rich fish such as herring, capelin, and pollock. But at this age, I just loved the experience of them.

Near sunrise, birds began to slip off the cliff ledges and circle around in front of the dark volcanic basalt cliffs. Soon, thousands of birds would be flying in every direction in loops around the face of the cliff, passing just inches over my head as I sat below. The murres flew quickly; kittiwakes were slower. The air was filled with the sound of thousands of fluttering wings and bird calls. They were rich and happy sounds, and I loved them.

I watched the birds maneuver around each other, repeatedly landing and taking off from the tiniest of ledges. With my child's mind, I marveled at how thousands of birds could fly up-down, right-left, down-up, left-right, and diagonally, all at the same time without any bird hitting another or even clipping a wing. How did they do this? I wondered. It looks like chaos, but they never even clip a wing.

From this expanse of deep observation, I asked myself a question. What made them different from me? I could think of several things right away. They don't use words or thoughts. They don't worry about tomorrow. They don't think about yesterday. They are full of life and intensely present in the moment. And somehow they know where all the others are too.

I thought about the hunters, who were never lulled as I was. Like the birds, a good hunter has to be fully present at all times, experiencing the rhythms without being lulled to sleep by them. This quality of awareness makes the hunter more successful. With it, there is a better chance he will get the sea lion, and a better chance he will not cause undue suffering when he kills it.

In my child's mind I decided to be like the birds. I had been doing it all along as I watched them, taking in their movements without interference of thought, just like they did. And now my grandfather's teaching about experiencing the world without words came suddenly and clearly to life for me.

It is logically impossible to put into words an experience that goes beyond words; such are the limits of language. In the wordless state, one becomes nothing but pure awareness, not attached to anything, not even thought. As soon as I go into my head I get lulled again, in much the same way as I was once lulled into a stupor after hours on the rocks. But whenever I can be without thought and in awareness, my experience is enhanced and new dimensions of human capability are opened to me.

As my awareness deepened I, too, learned to stay fully alert out on the rocks, to feel the sea lion before I could see it. More consistently, I could feel a halibut before it hit my jig fishing line. I could tell how the fish was hooked (by the lip, jaw, or torso); I could determine size and

weight; frequently, I would be able to tell if it was male or female. That kind of inner knowing is inexplicable by empirical standards, but it is nevertheless quite real. It is a mark of manhood to me and my people.

Inupiat, Yup'ik, Sugpiaq, Dene, Unungan...these are all different code names for the real people, real human beings, or people. Virtually every indigenous culture in Alaska refers to itself as *the people*, or *the human beings* or *the real human beings*. Real human beings are those who are profoundly connected, in spirit and with themselves. They are individuals who feel they are part of a whole and not separated.

You can recognize real human beings by how they inhabit their bodies. Real human qualities include patience, gentleness, soft-spokenness, observation, consideration for people and wildlife, cooperation, non-aggression, the ability to be present in the moment, and a deep reverence and respect for all living things. In Western-dominated cultures, these qualities are often associated with the feminine and dismissed as somehow of lesser or even negative worth in the fight for survival. In the Aleut worldview, however, they are the mark of a true person and a complete human being.

The way of the real human being is a proven pathway to living in long-term sustainable ways on our shared land. It can—and should—help us all deal more successfully with the daunting issues facing humankind.

### **Ways of a Real Human Being**

Listen

Experience the world without words

Revere all life

Respect all others

Affirm all others

Observe closely

Feel the connection to All That Is



**Dr. Angayuqaq “Oscar” Kawagley** was born in the southwestern coastal town of Mamterilleq (today called Bethel) in 1934 and raised in traditional tribal ways by his Yup'iaq-speaking grandmother. He was the first Yup'ik person to graduate from high school in Bethel, and he went on to earn a B.A. in Education from the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) and a Ph.D. in Social and Educational Studies from the University of British Columbia. He served as an Associate Professor of Education at UAF, project director of the Indian Education Act Program for the Anchorage School District, and

executive director of a number of nonprofit corporations. Recognized as one of Alaska's most influential thinkers and teachers, he developed ground-breaking courses in Alaska Native psychology and traditional ecological knowledge. He published extensively, including *A Yup'iaq Worldview: A Pathway to Ecology and Spirit*, and was an occasional actor, appearing in the animated film *Brother Bear*, the dramatic film *Salmonberries*, and the television show *Northern Exposure*. He devoted his life to preserving and communicating Yup'ik worldviews and values and to building bridges between Western and Alaska Native educational systems and scientific methodologies. He died in 2011, one year after this project was complete.

## On Silence

### Dr. Angayuqaq (Oscar) Kawagley

*On that Monday morning, Oscar Kawagley was 75 years old. He sat in his wheelchair, a gentle presence with a round face, alert eyes sharpened by wire-rim glasses, smiling. He didn't speak often, and when he did it was in a gentle and humor-filled voice.*

One of the things I learned at a very early age, especially going across the tundra with my grandmother, was silence and the art of listening carefully. Sometimes a matter of survival, eh?

*This was a characteristic rhythm of his speech, the lesson posed as a question, with a distinctly Canadian-sounding “eh?” at the end of it. He used it often, and almost always with a smile and a twinkle of the eye.*

And boy, that woman taught me a lot! Every time I speak, I include her, all the time. She gave me all the fundamentals for living a life.

*His face changed a little, and suddenly the intensity was different.*

That's not to say that I didn't go astray. But the educational system is very oppressive and very suppressive of the Native language and the Native culture. And that happened to me. Assimilative education was so effective that it caused me to suppress my own Native-ness for many years. Those were the saddest times of my life. I think I did more drinking during those times than any other time in my life because I was trying to be other than what I am.

*Another of Oscar's speech characteristics was his tendency to change the subject and then circle back around.*

Silence. I learned that a lot. Ice fishing: what are you gonna do, eh? And you begin to notice all the sounds you've been missing, you know? A bird singing, a dog barking, the wind blowing through the brush. And after a while you begin to think inwardly about your own self.

I remember going out muskrat hunting in the evenings, going by a big lake, starting a little bonfire, filling up a coffee can with water and coffee and letting it boil. The muskrats are attracted by the flickering flames, and you see them coming up...

*He leaned forward, alert to the night sounds.*

And of course you want to use your .22 to shoot them!

*He chuckled.*

And those were the best times because, boy, it required that you sit and notice everything about you. And very often you begin to look inside yourself and that's the time for introspection. Boy, that was the best thing I ever did.

*He spoke often in these terms, of the best times, when he was living his traditional Yup'ik life, and the worst times, when he was stripped of his Native-ness and forced to live a Western life that dishonored his traditional ways and values.*

But later on in life I forgot about those things, eh? I tried to suppress everything I had learned. I thought that my Native language was useless, my culture was out of tune with everything in the modern world. My first wife and I had three children. Both of us were fluent Yup'ik speakers, but I convinced her not to teach our Native language to our three kids. I said that will be a barrier to their learning English and whatever other disciplines that are being taught to them.

And, boy, that's the worst mistake I ever made. Now they ask me, "Why didn't you teach us?" But the situation has changed, eh? They can't understand completely the pressures that I went through to not speak my language or convey my culture to anyone else.

*He circled back around.*

But silence... Boy. When I think of my troubled times in Bethel...thank goodness I had a canoe! I could jump into my canoe and go to the sloughs and to the lakes and set up my little pup tent, and I'd be there in nature. And I'd think, "What the heck was I worried about? A lot of things that I can't do a darn thing about." And yet twice in my life I almost had ulcers: in the tenth grade, and again in my junior year at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. There was so much pressure, so much testing and judgment and grading. It was very different from the education I received as a Native person.

*And again, back around.*

But, silence... In the Native courses I teach today, I expect students to set aside a quiet time. It takes about twenty minutes or so to quiet down your brain...all your worries, the papers you have to write, the bills you have to pay. But after a while they get out of the way and you can really begin to experience the sounds around you. And after another while you begin to take a look inside of you.

I had a student once who had traveled throughout the world, including several months in Tibet. After the course I got an email from her from New York City, telling me what I had required them to do was the best experience that she had, even better than her meditations in Tibet. All I had asked them to do was write three or four sentences about the experiences that

were most important to them and then write a paper at the end of the semester saying what this quiet time—this meditation—had done for them.

You don't have to be sitting with your legs crossed and chanting "Om" to do your meditation. You can be walking along the bike trail. You can be in a noisy place downtown. With a lot of practice, those noises can become secondary, eh? Your silence becomes primary. And you can do all these things at the same time.

Even dog-sledding. I grew up from the fifth grade until about the tenth grade having my own little dog team, going out there hunting ptarmigans and rabbits. All you hear is the noise of the runners going over the ice and the snow, and you have a lot of time to think. Boy, that's probably the best thing I ever did!

You know what? I almost forgot. Last summer my son was dragging his heels about getting his bachelor degree. All he needs is one semester, but he won't do it! Last summer he was required to take a course that I teach that has that quiet time. And I was astounded to discover that this was a new experience for him. Quiet times. Here he is living out in Hooper Bay,\* but he's listening to his iPod and zooming across the tundra on his four-wheeler or his Skidoo.

Sitting in silence, you begin to realize that your spirituality goes with your deep connections to Mother Earth. The Bible says something about listening to the still small voice. The person of the universe, the spirit of the universe, the great consciousness is in nature. We expect Nature to teach us, to give us guidance, and to be our mentor. We as Native people realized a long time ago that Mother Earth has a culture and it's a Native culture. Embedded in our Native languages are our ways and tools for dealing with the changes that take place in our lives. Therefore we as Native people, as indigenous people, have to emulate Nature. It's the g-o-d effect: guidance, organization, and design. This is something that we as Native people need to learn again, especially in this time of great change, global change, climate change.

We don't have shamans today, but we do have a prophecy that when our shamans reappear they will be more powerful than before. We suspect there may be a few already out there that we don't know how to deal with, eh? There may be some in the villages, even some in Alaska Psychiatric Institute right now. We don't know what to do with them today, with their strange visitations and visions and things like that. But in times past, they were the shock absorbers. When calamities happened (starvation, maybe something that happened in the environment, things like that), they were the ones who brought back balance to the community.

*As Oscar came to the end of his musings, the room filled once again with silence. It was easier this time, a little more comfortable. We had some experience, and we had some context.*

*"Mmmm....silence," said Ilarion, very softly. "I always listen to Oscar and I always learn something. Every time."*

\* Hooper Bay (*Naparyarmiut* in Central Yup'ik) is a community on the Southwestern coast of Alaska.



## Practice Silence

Try Oscar's assignment. Set aside at least 20 minutes a day for silence.

Quiet your mind, letting go of your projects and worries, the papers you have to write, the bills you have to pay.

Listen to the sounds around you. What do you notice? What do you hear?

What might silence do for you?  
For your students?



## PEDAGOGIES

# Alaska Native Ways of Teaching and Learning

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That afternoon we introduced the central group assignment for the week. We would set aside time each day to work in small groups generating ideas for how to include Alaska Native issues and pedagogies in our courses. We asked the groups to identify courses they would be teaching in the fall semester and then to choose the most challenging one in the group to work on together. They would report out to the larger group on Friday and show us what they'd come up with.

### **Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning**

Earth-based Pace

Attending to Relationship

Place-based Knowledge/Learning  
from the Earth

Learning/Thinking/Working as  
a Group

Learning from Elders

Close Observation and Emulation

Indirect Teaching

Silence, Pausing and Reflection

All Senses Experiential Learning

Visual/Non-verbal Learning

Storytelling

Dance and Games

Good Instructions

Humor

Libby handed out a list of fourteen teaching practices that are common to many if not most traditional Alaska Native cultures. “Focus on these,” she told them. “We’ll be talking about them and trying to model them all week.”

Our list is not definitive, nor does it attempt to speak for all Alaska Native cultures, which are highly diverse. While sharing many basic values and bases of knowledge, each group has its own unique ways of expressing them and passing them on to new generations. In addition, Alaska Native ways of teaching are holistic, not discrete or easily bounded; they flow into each other like movements in a dance. If we occasionally repeat ourselves in describing them, it is because translation requires us to draw lines that do not exist in actual practice.

All of that can make these practices hard to describe, but it doesn’t make them any less real or effective. We approached them in many different ways throughout the intensive—directly in conversations and exercises and indirectly via stories and experiences. We asked Ilarion to summarize them briefly for this book, to create points of focus and attention for readers.

## Earth-based Pace

Living in sustained and intimate connection with the natural world for thousands of years, Alaska’s Native peoples have developed an earth-based or nature-based pacing in their physical movements, community activities, and patterns of thought and speech. Traditional life is organized around the seasons rather than a specified number of days in a year. There are times for fish camp, for gathering berries, for mending nets and repairing tools, and many others. Thoughts, speech, and movements are synchronized with the natural cycles and environments in which you live. To be a successful hunter, fisher, gatherer—and therefore human being—you must connect deeply with and adapt your own ways to natural systems and creatures. You need the patience and timing and experience to understand natural processes at the deepest levels. The more engaged in thought or speaking you are—particularly rapid thought and speech—the more you may miss things in nature. And that, of course, can be fatal.

“Alaska Native people think and speak slowly as a direct result of learning earth-based pacing from their parents and other hunters, gatherers, and Elders who practice their traditional ways,” says Ilarion. “That doesn’t mean they aren’t smart or that they aren’t quick when they need to be, just more deliberate. They hold an open space between voices. They make time for silence and reflection between overture and response. Even young people who have picked up their pace to match the dominant Western community tend to speak more slowly than those around them, to be more comfortable with silence, and to refrain from interrupting others before they have finished speaking.”



### Learning From the Land

*A few ideas you might try in order to connect classroom learning to the land in your region.*

Send your students outdoors now and then. Find ways to connect your content to the world outside your walls.

As examples:

- Journalism students could report on the weather or the activities of non-human species.
- Psychology and nursing students might consider how being connected to the natural world affects a person’s overall health and well-being.
- Justice and sociology students might analyze behaviors as expressions of disconnection from the natural world.
- Business students might consider the impacts of financial decisions on the lands and waters in your region or the real cost of doing business when environmental

## **Attending to Relationship**

As in other oral cultures, virtually all traditional Alaska Native teaching and learning occurs within a relational matrix. The teacher and learner know each other, and they know each other's family, village, tribe, clan, home ground, and history as well. They descend from the same ancestors, learn from the same Elders, depend upon the same land and waters for fish, animals, and plants. They experience a sense of self in complex and intricate relationship to all these communities simultaneously.

A real human being is always aware of being in continuous relationship to everything and everyone else and of needing to ensure the health of those ties. Attending to relationships, therefore, is both the means and the end of much traditional Native education. Teaching and learning always occur in relationship to others, modeling how to maintain harmonious, balanced relationships with all of creation.

## **Place-based Knowledge and Learning from the Earth**

Indigenous knowledge is place-based knowledge. It springs from a deep and detailed experience of a place and manifests as a sense of belonging to, identification with, and awareness of everything that goes on in that place. In traditional cultures, you need to know as much as possible about the land and waters on which you live; the plants and animals you depend on for your survival; and the people with whom you live your life. All significant learning comes from the place and is responsive to the place.

Place-based knowledge has an obvious survival advantage. The better you can read the weather, terrain, water, vegetation, and behavior patterns of fish and wildlife, the more safe and successful you are likely to be. Elders' stories and knowledge offer another kind of advantage, as does community knowledge about subsistence life. Add in your own experiences of the place, and you have an inter-generational continuity of knowledge and a deep understanding of the natural cycles and ways of life in that place.

"In the Pribilof Islands," says Ilarion, "the men fish for halibut to feed the villages of St. Paul and St. George. They spend long hours in small boats, with storms that can sweep in on a moment's notice. They know the sea bottom for at least ten miles around their islands. Through close observation and experience over many years, they know where to find the rocky bottoms, the sandy bottoms, and the boundary zones. They know where the large rocks are and the dangerous waters, where the halibut like to feed, when they feed, changes in tides, and their effects on halibut feeding patterns. They know all these things and how to get safely home as well. As a testament to their at-sea skills, there has only been one drowning in the last hundred years."

## Learning, Thinking, Working as a Group

From early childhood, Alaska's Native peoples are oriented towards the group. The basic unit is an extended family that includes cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and friends. Hunting, fishing, gathering, and food preparation and storage are group activities in which all share in the work. Group knowledge is considered superior to individual knowledge, particularly as it applies to wildlife and the environment. It is engrained in individuals to think of the group's welfare ahead of their own.

Virtually everything in traditional Native life involves group interaction and cooperation. In subsistence fish camps, extended families gather to work side by side. The men and young ones lay out the fish nets and deliver the fish to shore. The women and girls cut and hang the fish to dry on racks. Similarly, hunters and whaling crews work in cooperative groups, both for safety reasons and to increase everyone's chance of getting food. The animals they kill and the foods they gather are first shared with those back in the village who are not able to hunt (such as Elders, widows, and the disabled) and only then divided up amongst those who participated.

"Group cohesion, cooperation, and sharing have critical survival benefits," says Ilarion. "The success of the hunt depends on them. Hunters tune into each other so deeply that when the lead hunter fires a shot, the others follow within micro-seconds. This phenomenal timing minimizes the chance that the animal will be merely wounded or will get away."

## Learning from Elders

In traditional Alaska Native cultures, wisdom and skills are taught largely by Elders. Elders are not just old people, but those who have learned well the lessons of the earth and of living closely with others. They are tradition-bearers who know the stories that have been passed along for generations. They are leaders who concern themselves with sustaining culture, guiding younger generations, encouraging community cohesion and harmony, and guarding the health of fish, wildlife, and ecosystems.

Real Elders don't call themselves Elders; it is a status granted by the community. Elders are recognized for their wisdom and integrity, their knowledge of traditional values and practices, and their deep spiritual connections to all of creation. They are sought out for the knowledge and wisdom they have gained through life experience, attentive listening, and a deep understanding of the value and purposes of traditional ways. They are respected for their life wisdom and understanding of human relationships. They are consulted for their insights and ideas about a myriad of issues affecting the individual, the family, and the community.

"Compared to other places in the world," says Ilarion, "Alaska is fortunate to still have many Elders with intact connections to traditional sources of knowledge. Unfortunately, they are not often respected or understood by Western society. Yup'ik Elders, for example, are experts in predicting the health and timing of salmon runs for the year ahead. They observe the weather every day, taking note of wind directions, the frequency of storms, the types and frequency of precipitation, and the types and conditions of vegetation. Scientists cannot explain how all these

factors influence a salmon run and are typically skeptical of the Elders' assertions. Yet each year's salmon run demonstrates the Elders' accuracy once again."

## Close Observation and Emulation

In traditional learning environments, Alaska Native young people are expected to attend very closely to what is being demonstrated and to learn by observation, emulation, experimentation, and independent reasoning. Adults discourage direct questioning, use very little direct instruction, and make very few detailed explanations. Instead, they invite the learners along—usually from a very early age—to watch, listen, and learn. Corrections are accomplished subtly and non-verbally; for example, if an Elder is teaching beading and notices a younger person struggling with her beadwork, the Elder may simply come and sit next to the pupil and allow the learner to look over her shoulder if she chooses.

## Indirect Teaching

Most indigenous Elders and teachers offer little, if any, direct verbal feedback to correct performance errors. According to traditional understanding, you risk diminishing a human being by giving specific instructions. By leaving the impression that the learner is doing something wrong, you could harm his self confidence and slow down the learning process. Instead, the teacher might make a joke. For example, one might tease, "Somebody's going to have a big piece here when they chew it." Or, "Somebody's going to be lucky to have a big piece like this." The comment will be something innocuous but light that makes the point. Or they might



### Keen Observation and Non-verbal Learning

*A few ideas for converting at least part of your teaching to non-verbal modalities.*

Consider using film or video or still images rather than books and words to convey important content. Ask students to pay close attention and report what they observe.

Invite a guest expert to demonstrate rather than lecture about a particular skill. Follow up with a class discussion of what the students observed.

Notice the range of responses and discuss how multiple viewpoints might increase group knowledge and affect the outcome of what is learned.

tell a story that points the learner in a more productive direction or conveys important lessons. Part of the psychology is that by making learning fun and keeping it light, people will learn more quickly.

Indirect approaches are considered deeply respectful of every individual in the learning environment. Adults are respected for their experience, but they do not impose particular answers or preconceived ideas on to the young people. Learners are expected to use their inherent intelligence to figure things out on their own. Inherent intelligence includes the physical senses (hearing, touch, taste, smell, and sight) and the senses of the mind and heart (intuition, gut feeling, emotion). When these senses are all active, the answers can come from within. The learner is then empowered to function independently and at a high level in future situations, which will require customized responses to unique situations.

“At its best,” says Ilarion, “this type of learning gives people confidence in their abilities and helps them develop into self-aware, self-motivated, empowered human beings. You know about your own gifts, strengths, and limitations through a deep experience of them. You honor and appreciate the gifts, experiences, guidance, and wisdom of those who came before you. You understand your place in the world. The Elders say that all living things know their place, but humans are the only ones who ever forget it. This way of teaching and learning helps you remember.”

## **Silence and Reflection**

There is a distinctive rhythm to indigenous discourse. The pace is deliberately slow, and there are lots of pauses and silences. No one interrupts or talks over another. Traditional listening is an active process of consciousness, awareness, and attention that begins with mutual respect for and from each individual in the exchange. Listeners quiet their minds, give the speaker their full attention, listen without agenda, and take in as fully as possible each speaker’s unique truth. As each speaker finishes, there is a pause for silence and reflection. The pauses give listeners important time to make meaning out of their observations and experiences. Reflection time helps each individual to be a positive force within the small, interdependent group and also able to think independently when circumstances require it. Competition and domination are minimized.

Indigenous cultures value silence. Too much talking interferes with observing, listening, sensing, experiencing, deciding wisely, and acting effectively. You have to be still in order to observe clearly and sense the connections between yourself, others, and the natural world. Silence creates the space for deepening that understanding and connection and for getting a more accurate picture of the whole.

“Silence is the place for introspection, peace of mind and heart, and knowing who you truly are,” says Ilarion. “It is a sign of respect to listen in silence without thinking of one’s own response. The real human being listens without agenda and then speaks from his or her own truth.”

## All-senses Experiential Learning

Experiential learning in the Alaska Native way uses all the senses (sight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell, plus intuition and gut feelings), usually without the interference of thought. Thought is activated when action is required, but not before. Young people learn by engaging in the physical activities that support the survival of the community (fishing, hunting, harvesting, sewing, preparing food, mending nets, and so on). These activities require cooperation, collaboration, attentiveness to detail, and memory and skill development.

In traditional subsistence settings, Alaska Native learners absolutely have to master the skills and wisdom of the adults and Elders; their very lives depend upon it. Failure to learn the lessons passed on by the Elders could lead to hunger, accidents, and even death—for the individual or



### Silence and Reflection

*A technique that encourages reflection and allows discussion participants to plan their responses. Educational research on the related strategies of “wait time” and “think time” demonstrates dramatic achievement gains when students are given time to think before they speak.*

Experiment with slowing down your classroom delivery, giving students more time to process information. Slow your rate of speech; build pauses and silences into your lectures and discussions.

Introduce a minute of silence now and then during lectures or discussions to allow everyone to mull things over and plan their next response. Allow silence to exist without panicking or filling it yourself.

Create listening pairs, in which each student gets a few minutes of uninterrupted time to reflect aloud with respectful attention from another student.

Have students write down their reflections before engaging in a discussion. Give them extra days to respond to particularly tough questions.

#### Don't

- answer your own questions too quickly.
- mistake silence for “dead air” or disengagement. Discussions are not performances, and the most talkative are not the only ones with ideas.
- assume that those who speak more are learning more.

*Adapted from Landis (Start Talking) and Brookfield and Preskill (Discussion as a Way of Teaching).*

for the whole community. “Mastering the knowledge, stories, and ways of knowing of one’s people is essential for hunting and gathering, for getting along in the community, and for our very survival,” says Ilarion. “It also deepens one’s understanding of one’s place in existence and spiritually.”

## Visual and Non-verbal Learning

Indigenous people in village communities must take daily notice of a staggering amount of detail. They read the weather, noticing cloud formation, precipitation levels, and ice conditions. They read the plants and animals, noticing changes in migratory patterns, population size, distribution. Hunters and fishers pay attention to the health of the animals they’ve just taken; they will apply that knowledge to future hunts. As they prepare the food, women pay attention to the color and texture of the creatures under their knives, making sure they are safe to eat. Each individual notices an abundance of very specific details about this fish, this duck, this place. He or she learns the necessary skills for fishing, hunting, harvesting, food preparation, and other important activities by watching closely and emulating. And they connect those observations to the long-term memories of their own parents and Elders, all the way back to the deepest of human times.

“Visual acuity is central to an Alaska Native person,” says Ilarion. “It is the first thing we learn. It is essential to our safety, our success in hunting and gathering, and our ability to sustain harmonious human relationships.”

## Storytelling

Instead of direct instruction, indigenous peoples use storytelling to teach younger generations much of what they need to know:

- information about the lands and waters;
- the safety of various hunting, fishing, and gathering practices;
- ethics and values;
- self and group responsibilities;
- the consequences of one’s actions;
- spirituality;
- traditional ways of knowing;
- how to be and become a real human being;
- a human being’s relationship to fish, wildlife and habitat; and
- a human being’s place within creation.

Stories convey survival information about lands, waters, weather patterns, animal behaviors, dangers within the environment, and hunting success. They convey cultural information about historical events, kinship ties, and appropriate social skills and attitudes. If someone is creating disharmony in the community, Elders will sometimes tell a corrective story to a whole group. They do not criticize or discipline or even single out the individual in any way, but simply tell the



story, knowing that a person who is not defensive, who does not feel hurt or put down, is more likely to hear what is being said and to understand the consequences of the incorrect behavior.

Storytellers know that lessons will be remembered better if they are conveyed in an entertaining, relaxing, humorous, emotional, and animated style. Elders will frequently tell the same story over and over again as the years go by, knowing that as the listeners gain more life experiences, they will hear and understand different things. In oral cultures, stories are always told in intimate social settings where a great deal can be conveyed through non-verbal body language and tone of voice: a raised eyebrow, a well-placed gesture, the musical movements of tone of voice. When we tell those stories out of context—as we do in a written text—we sacrifice many layers of human connection and meaning.

## Dance and Games

Activities that involve physical movement such as dancing, drumming, and game-playing serve a variety of cultural, community wellness, and pedagogical roles, including

- passing on stories and histories;
- memorializing events;
- conveying appropriate hunting and gathering practices and protocols;
- demonstrating how individual expression and group cooperation can be balanced;
- developing physical health, strength, confidence, and skills to balance with intellectual competencies; and
- connecting the dancer with other community members.



### Storytelling

*A few ideas for using more stories in your teaching.*

Whenever possible, illustrate your most important points through stories.

Consider how you might use fiction, oral history, case studies, fables, examples from the lives of historical people, and examples from your own life to convey important conflicts and issues.

Encourage your students to share stories from their own cultures, experiences, or personal journeys that are related to the topic at hand.

Repetition and the engagement of the whole body embed the teachings in the mind of the learner. The cooperative nature of dancing encourages harmony in human relationships. Individuals often improvise within the larger form of the group dance, frequently in humorous ways. In this way, much traditional dancing balances stillness and seriousness with movement and lightness of being, and group activity with individual expression.

“Balancing intellectual learning with other forms of learning, including kinetic, can ensure that students don’t cut off the life and activities of the mind from a more integrated, holistic experience of being human,” says Ilarion.

## **Good Instructions**

“Good instructions” are like rules for life and living. They are usually told in the form of stories from distant times, and they include both actions and their consequences. They are delivered in an open manner, without limiting, judging, or disempowering the listener in any way. There’s no element of chastisement. Providing good instructions is considered a demonstration of love for a child.

“Good instructions sharpen our awareness of the potential consequences of human actions,” says Ilarion. “They teach us how to conduct ourselves with other human beings or when hunting, fishing, and gathering; how to avoid conflict; the importance of humor; and the importance of respect—for ourselves, for others, and for all life. “

## **Humor**

Alaska’s Native peoples use humor in every facet of life: to ease tensions, to rebalance energies, and to bond with each other in shared experience and purpose. Humor helps people think better, act in healthier ways, and live more creatively. It diffuses conflicts and keeps spirits afloat. People heal faster when they laugh. Humor helps correct behaviors that are problematic in the community by allowing people to learn without becoming defensive. It teaches people not to take themselves or their challenges too seriously and helps them remember important lessons well.

Native humor tends to be self-deprecating rather than aimed at other people, thereby helping to ensure that humility remains the prevailing ethic within the community. For example, some Aleut villages have an annual gathering around the Russian Orthodox New Year, where skits are created and played out for the community. Usually a small group of men will dress as women and a small group of women will dress as men. They exaggerate the features and aspects of the gender they are depicting in hilarious ways. Each gender gets to make fun of the other, reflecting some aspects of reality that might have bearing on the well-being of the group. In this way, each group can learn while laughing.

“The Elders teach that we must strive for balance in all things,” says Ilarion. “Right now, things are out of balance in most Western workplaces, educational systems, and classrooms. Humor is in short supply; an overwhelming aura of seriousness prevails. This is not to say that seriousness is inappropriate, but Alaska Native ways teach that it must be balanced with equal amounts of fun, play, and lightness of being. To Alaska Native peoples, an appropriate sense of humor is a sign of true intelligence.”



## Reflection

How many of these  
strategies might be practiced  
in your classrooms?



**Jack Dalton** is an acclaimed Yup'ik storyteller, actor, writer, and teacher who has performed throughout North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Rooted in Naparyarmiut (Hooper Bay), born in Bethel, raised in Anchorage, and graduated from the University of Alaska Anchorage, Jack is an ambassador between the two worlds of his Yup'ik and European heritages. His theatrical productions of epic storytelling include *Raven's Radio Hour*, *Time Immemorial*, and *Assimilation*, and he plans to create an opera based on the life of Ada Blackjack, an Inupiaq woman who survived two years alone on an uninhabited Russian island. His work has been recognized by the Rasmuson Foundation, the World Indigenous Peoples' Conference on Education, and the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of the American Indian. In 2012, he served as the Artistic Director in Residence at Out North Contemporary Art House in Anchorage.

Courtesy of Jamie Lang Photography

## The Creation Legend of the Yup'ik People

Jack Dalton (ꜥꜥꜥ 2002)

*Special guest Jack Dalton treated us to a private performance that demonstrated both the role and the fine art of storytelling in Alaska Native cultures. In storytelling mode, Jack uses his whole body, acting out all the major characters, changing voice, tone, and body language to make each one come alive. As Raven, he crosses his arms behind his back, leans forward, and rocks gently from foot to foot. As the human being, he picks berries, paddles his boat, flirts with a woman. He is by turns fearsome, coy, saddened, contemplative, graceful and funny and wise. He embodies the story with a full range of life.*

One day, Raven was flying around, thinking about what he was going to eat next and who he was going to steal it from. That's right: Raven likes to steal the other animals' food. And oh, this gets Raven in a great deal of trouble indeed. But that is OK. Do you know why? Then I will tell you. It is OK that Raven gets in so much trouble because it is from this trouble that you and I can learn a great many things.

Now, on this particular day, he was flying over the beach, when he looked down and saw something rather strange. A pod of some sort seemed to have washed ashore, and since Raven hadn't seen anything like this before, he thought he had better go down and take a closer look.

As he got closer the pod opened up, and out rolled the strangest creature Raven had ever seen. Now this creature, it had absolutely no hair upon its body. Then it stood up on its hind legs

and stretched, and when it finished stretching, it did not return to all fours.

The creature looked around, saw Raven, and asked Raven the question that all new creatures ask, “What am I doing here?”

To which Raven replied what he replied to all new creatures, “You are here to be.”

“To be?” thought the creature. “But how can I be something when I’m not sure what that something is?” So it was then that the creature asked Raven a very interesting question. “Well, then, who am I?”

“Who am I?” thought Raven to himself. “Now that’s a very interesting question. None of the other creatures has asked a question like that before. There must be something special about this creature, something more on the inside, causing it to ask interesting questions and creating that little twinkle in its eye. This creature deserves a very special name indeed.”

And so Raven thought for quite some time before saying at last, “You are a Human Being. Human is your form, the physical part of you. But there is something more on the inside, something special, causing you to ask interesting questions and perhaps even creating that little twinkle in your eye. This we will call the being, the something more.”

Human Being stood for a time and thought about what it meant to be a Human Being. And, after a great deal of consideration, Human Being proceeded to say one thing. And believe it or not, this one thing—four little words—that human being uttered on that first day ended up setting the entire course of human history in motion. These four little words were these I shall speak to you right now. They were “I . . . am . . . really hungry!”

Raven looked around and said, “There are many berries here. You can eat those!”

And so Human Being went around, picking and eating berries, picking and eating berries, picking and eating berries until, oooh, the first human stomach ache was felt.

Raven could see that a creature like Human Being would need more variety in its diet. So he flew to a nearby stream where there was mud along the shore, and he made little lumps in the mud. Using his magic he waved his wings over these lumps, and they came to life and scurried off onto the tundra. “Get those!” said Raven. “You can eat those!”

So Human Being went running after these little creatures and soon had the first meal of mice and shrew. But it did not last very long.

Raven could see a creature like Human Being needed something more substantial in its diet. So once again he flew back to the stream and this time made larger lumps in the mud. Once again he used his magic and waved his wings over, and the lumps came to life and swam off into the water. “Get those!” said Raven. “You can eat those.”

So Human Being went sloshing through the water. “What are you doing!?” cried Raven. “How do you expect to catch these fish, as we shall call them, like that? They are creatures of the water, and you are a creature of the land. How do you expect to be as fast as they are in their own environment? But you can stand very, very still next to the water and, if you are patient, the fish will soon forget you are there. When this happens, that will be your chance—if you are quick enough—to catch one.”

**“Here are a few things I’ve learned on my travels. A storyteller is not a storyteller if there is no one there to hear. A story is not a story if those who hear it do not tell it to someone else. A culture is not a culture if there are no stories passed from generation to generation. And a human being cannot be a human being without a culture and its stories.”**

And so Human Being did this and was soon full and very, very happy. But the happiness did not last very long. Soon, Human Being had another important thing to say, and this time it was, "I am cold."

Raven thought this was rather self-evident, seeing as how Human Being had no fur on its body. He flew back to the stream and made another lump in the mud. Next he went and found strong flexible willow branches which he stuck in as legs. Then, feeling somewhat artistic on this day, he took some frilly branches and stuck those into the head. He waved his wings over, and this lump came to life and went running off onto the tundra. "Get that!" said Raven. "Not only can you eat the meat from its bones, but you can also use its fur to keep you warm. But, this caribou, as we shall call it, is much too fast and strong for you alone. You must also use your intelligence, your brains, your smarts. You can sit and watch this caribou, learn about its way of life and its habits and soon you will understand when the weakest moment is. Then you can make tools for yourself and use them to go out and get that caribou."

So Human Being did this and sat for many cold and hungry days, watching the caribou, learning about its ways of life, and imagining the tools that would be needed to get it. Finally, one day Human Being picked up the tools, went out after the caribou...and missed! Later, with new tools, Human Being went back out and then . . . there was enough meat to last the whole winter and furs to keep warm. And Human Being was very, very happy indeed.

But this happiness did not last very long, and soon Human Being had yet another important thing to say. This time it was, "I am lonely."

At first, Raven was somewhat offended by this. "Lonely!? What do you mean lonely? What, am I not good enough company for you? Am I not the one who found you and taught you to survive in this place? Do we not sit around and talk about many interesting and important things? I mean, I'm not a bird brain, you know!"

But soon Raven and his bird brain realized that Human Being had no other human beings to keep it company. So of course Human Being was lonely. And with that, Raven flew back to the stream and this time, after looking very closely at Human Being, Raven began to make another one that would look exactly the same.

He was about to wave his wings over it when he realized, "If I do this, it will only be a human in form. It will have no being, no twinkle in the eye."

Then Raven had an idea. He flew up into the sky, found a star, brought that star back, and placed it into the new human's forehead. Then he waved his wings over, and the new human being came to life and began walking towards the first human being.

Now Raven could see that the first human being and the new human being...well, they didn't look at all alike. And Raven went to apologize to the human beings for this most egregious mistake. But the human beings said, "Well. These differences between us . . . they really aren't that bad. . . . In fact, they'll probably work out pretty well after all."

And so the one Human Being walked over toward the other Human Being and said, "*Waqaa*. Hi there."

And the other Human Being replied, "*Cengacit?* Who are you?"

Raven could see that as the human beings got closer together the twinkle in their eyes brightened. "This," said Raven, "we will call love. And if you come together in this love, then the twinkles in your eyes may grow so bright they just might create a third being. This can grow in the female until it gets a human form of its own and can survive in the world."

So the human beings did this, and soon there was a family. And soon after that there was an entire village. And everybody was very, very happy indeed.

But soon there came a time when the human beings began to take more than they needed. Raven could see this was not good and went to talk to the human beings about this. But they would not listen, claiming they had nothing to be afraid of. With this in mind, Raven flew back to the stream, and in the mud this time made a very large lump. He went and found clam shells, and breaking these into long sharp pieces, placed them where the feet and mouth would be. Then with a heavy heart he used his magic, waving his wings over, and the lump came to life. And this creature, this Bear, went out and killed the first human being it encountered.

Now the human beings had never seen one of their own kind dead before. And they gathered around in silent awe. Soon Raven arrived and took the star and returned that star to the sky.

When he came back to the human beings he said, "I have not done this because I am mad at you or because I do not like you, because I like you very much. I have done this because I was worried that you were beginning to forget to live by the way, worried because you were beginning to take more than you needed. And this is very dangerous, for it upsets the balance of all things. It is so very dangerous, it's like . . . well, it's like eating your own self up. And you can imagine, one cannot survive very long at all if all they have to eat is themselves. So you must remember: live by the way, take only what you need, and use as much of it as you can. Try not to waste. I know you have become used to your luxuries and that living by the way seems, well, rather primitive to you now. But I can assure you that living by the way you can lead very happy and fulfilling lives indeed. And when you are ready to leave, I can take your stars and return them to the sky. And there you can watch over all that you love for as long as you like. But remember. Live by the way, and take only what you need."

The human beings were very ashamed of themselves, and they promised Raven they would do as he said. And they did so for a time, because now there was bear to be afraid of on the land. But soon, the human beings learned how to use driftwood and bones and the skins of animals to make boats, and with these boats they were able to go out onto the sea.

Now there was bear to be afraid of on the land, but there was nothing to be afraid of on the sea. And so much to take: fish and birds and seals and whales. Soon, once again, the humans were taking more than they needed.

Raven knew this was not good and knew that speaking to the human beings would be of no use. So he returned once again to the stream, and made another very large lump in the mud. Then he went and found the two biggest willow trees, took their trunks and peeled off their bark to expose the ivory white flesh. Using his beak he carved two great tusks, which he placed where the mouth would be. And again with a heavy heart, this one last time, use his magic and waved his wings over. And the lump came to life and the creature lumbered out into the water.

Soon, a young man went hunting out in his qayaq and encountered this walrus, as it would one day be called. And you can imagine, it did not take very long at all for the tusks of this great walrus to tear the tiny qayaq to shreds. It did take some time, however, for the body of the young hunter to wash ashore. And once again the human beings gathered around in silent awe.

Raven soon arrived, took the star, and returned it to the sky. When he came back to the human beings, he said to them only one thing: "Never forget the way." And with that he turned and waddled silently down the beach.

The human beings were so very ashamed of themselves. They were ashamed because they realized that they had been given a chance and failed. They were then given a second chance, and they failed once again. And now they were being given a third chance. What would happen if they failed this time?

The human beings realized they must come up with some way to let all the human beings of the future know about the way, to know that they must not take more than they needed. So the Elders convened for a time of great discussion, and after this great discussion they let the other human beings know what must occur. And what they said was this:

“We must take the story of what has happened here, and we must give this story to the next generation. And then that generation can give the story to the generation after that. And so on, and so forth, to the end time.”

This is how the art of storytelling was begun. It is in this way that we—as Human Beings, as Yup'ik—know who we are, where we come from, and why we live the way we live. And there are those who believe that within these stories are the answers to our questions about the future.





**Libby Roderick** serves as Associate Director for UAA's Center for Advancing Faculty Excellence, where she oversees faculty programs on diversity and pedagogy, sustainability, and 21st century trends in higher education. A life-long Alaskan, she has degrees from Yale University and Alaska Pacific University. She is the editor of *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues: Responses to Frequently Asked Questions*; associate editor of *Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education*;

author of an article on the value of cross-cultural faculty development in *To Improve the Academy*; and contributor to other national publications. As Project Director for UAA's Difficult Dialogues initiatives, she co-designed and facilitated faculty development intensives for both projects and serves on the Executive Board of the National Difficult Dialogues Resource Center. Libby is also an internationally recognized singer/songwriter and recording artist.

## A Question of Survival

### Libby Roderick

As a result of our Difficult Dialogues work, I am sometimes asked to speak about this project at other universities and conferences. In those settings I like to share a chart that suggests, in a somewhat reductionist way, some of the major differences between academic and indigenous cultures. "One is cyclical," I say. "Holistic, organic, and experiential. The other tends to be linear, analytic, mechanistic, and committed to objectivity. Out of these differences the two cultures construct, experience, and use knowledge in completely different ways. As a result, there are vast differences in what they know and how they know it."

The graphic is always very well received. Audiences may be surprised at the range and depth of the differences, but they understand them almost immediately. And once they acknowledge and start thinking about them, they begin to realize the implications both for indigenous students and for Western institutions.

It's useful to elaborate on our differences because of how deeply these characteristics are engrained in us. When they are *our* reality, it's easy to assume they are *the* reality. Those of us in the dominant culture are rarely, if ever, called to seriously question our experience of reality. Without an effort of will or an out-of-the box experience, we often can't even see things any other way. People outside the dominant culture, however, easily recognize the existence of multiple realities; they walk in two (or more) worlds every day.

I've found that it never hurts to remind Westerners that there are other ways of thinking and being as legitimate and filled with potential as those that currently predominate in the U.S. In an increasingly global society, Westerners raised with heavily individualistic values are coming

## Western cultures

## Alaska Native cultures

### Basic Question

How to succeed

How to be a real human being

### Foundation

2,500 years of Western academic/scientific tradition

10,000 years of survival in a harsh and challenging ecosystem

### Characteristics

Assertive

Individualistic

Fast, machine-based pace

Written

Competitive

Productivity/efficiency

Ask questions

Quick response

Goal-oriented

Don't stand out

Group concerns first

Slow, earth-based pace

Visual/oral

Cooperative

Relationships

Listen and observe

Pause/reflect

Process-oriented

### Concept of Knowledge

Western cultures tend to treat knowledge like a rational, discrete artifact, a portable commodity that can be moved from one place to another. Western knowledge-makers seek to develop systems and theories that can apply to all places and all communities. The knowledge is horizontal, and it runs far and wide.

Indigenous cultures tend to treat knowledge as a deep awareness of the world around them and their place within that world. Indigenous knowledge derives from long-term, intimate knowledge and experience of a particular place and a particular community. It is vertical, and it runs deep.

### Transfer of Knowledge

Western knowledge is transferred through written texts or between individuals who are largely strangers to one another, connecting people through ideas.

Indigenous knowledge is transferred verbally, experientially, kinesthetically and/or visually between close-knit individuals sharing the same community and place (e.g. young people learning from their Elders through storytelling, or girls learning from their mothers and Aunties while bathing together in the steam bath).

### Educational Practices

Western educational systems are based largely on written communication. They prioritize reading, writing, and the rapid exchange of vast quantities of information (scientific, literary, theoretical, anthropological, etc.) drawn from research, writing, and creative activity around the globe and throughout recorded history.

Indigenous teaching and learning practices are relational. They prioritize observation, awareness, intelligent action, and the passing on of cultural values and practices from Elders and other community members. All learning occurs within a matrix of relationships between people, place, the natural world, and past and future generations.

### Economies

Western economies depend on the mass production of goods and information.

Indigenous economies depend on small-scale hunting, fishing, and harvesting in interdependent relationship with other people and the land.

into contact more and more with collectivist cultures throughout the world. We need to develop a deeper respect for these ways of thinking.

Chances are that with a quick glance at the chart (opposite page), you'd be nodding your head too. You might not understand or agree with every particular, but you'll get the gist. Differences as sweeping as these are bound to have enormous effects on the way we live our lives in the world.

But herein lies a danger. It's the same danger we faced every day as we tried to translate the highly experiential, non-verbal work of our intensive into a book of words. Charts and books and words appeal to the Western mind. When we get *them*, we may think we've gotten *it*.

But it's likely we haven't, at least not on a very deep level. We have not learned the most important lessons until we've experienced them for ourselves. And Native cultures are all about experience over concept. The danger in trying to describe this work is that participants and readers may content themselves with learning about indigenous pedagogies without ever feeling their wisdom, laughing at their jokes, or experiencing traditional learning from the inside. All too often, Western learners content themselves with information rather than experience, confusing the map (the lines on the page) with the experience of the place itself. We don't feel the breeze, taste the berries, smell the grasses and the sea, hear the music and the stories.

Why does this matter? Because the world beyond our campus boundaries matters. It matters a lot. We are dedicated to the success of future generations, and we play a key role in preparing future leaders, employees, and citizens. For these and other reasons, higher education should be (and in some cases already is) dedicating itself to helping create and support a sustainable society, one that allows future generations to survive and thrive at least as well as previous generations. Many of the world's problems are exacerbated, if not created, by university-educated professionals. If we want our students to live in a more just, healthy, and sustainable world, we need to take a close look at what needs to change within our own system so that higher education stops creating problems and starts working toward solutions.

It's the ultimate challenge: how to establish economic security for the world's people while ensuring environmental integrity so that all may survive. Efforts to protect the environment at the expense of its human inhabitants are unworkable and oppressive. Efforts to ensure economic prosperity while ignoring the health of the biosphere are suicidal and homicidal. There can't be just two sides in this struggle, or we're all going to lose. I stand with University of Vermont professor David Orr who says it is incumbent upon educators of all disciplines to prioritize and teach the principles of environmental sustainability "so that all the other struggles may go on."

Indigenous knowledge and wisdom could deeply inform our efforts to educate for sustainability. Indigenous cultures include some of the world's poorest people (in terms of material wealth) as well as some of the richest (in terms of understanding the interdependence between humans and the natural environment). Learning more about indigenous people begins to address both of these interrelated issues simultaneously.

In my opinion, and as Western scientists have increasingly come to recognize, indigenous Elders hold the equivalent of multiple Ph.D.s in their deep understanding of the earth's ecosystems. They also have the systems thinking necessary to recognize and respond appropriately to the requirements of sustaining a healthy biosphere.

Indeed, given that the survival of indigenous communities has depended entirely on precise understandings of natural environments, one way of looking at indigenous cultures

\* From an article of the same name that first appeared in the Oberlin College *Observer* in 1998.

is as highly applied scientific endeavors. Their experiences are the most recent data points in a longitudinal study that extends over ten thousand years. The database is filled with extraordinarily detailed information about fish cycles, wind patterns, weather indices, tides, waves, plants, mammals, birds, rocks, interactions between species, interactions between species and the elements, and more. Peer review occurs continuously in the form of comparisons of information and observations with other individuals whose lives also depend on getting things right. The difference between accurate and sloppy research is the life or death of your family.

Ten thousand years of life-and-death pressures have honed indigenous teaching practices to a supreme level of effectiveness. We need to keep that history in mind as we approach them ourselves. We must respect the practices of speaking precisely, listening and observing intently, passing on accumulated knowledge and wisdom in the form of stories and engaged, physical lessons.

I've heard it said that "when an Elder dies, a library burns." When it comes to millennia of knowledge and wisdom about ecosystems and intelligent human adaptation to them, indigenous cultures are bursting with libraries that the rest of the world, including institutions of higher learning, have largely failed to even visit, let alone plumb. These riches are available to anyone who is open to new ways of thinking and learning. The global ecological challenges facing us require no less than all the knowledge and wisdom in the world. Learning from indigenous experts may become increasingly necessary for global survival. As acclaimed Native American writer, poet, and filmmaker Sherman Alexie told a UAA audience some years ago: "You're gonna need us."

**"Higher education has a unique role in America. It has been granted tax-free status, the ability to receive public and private funds, and academic freedom, in exchange for educating students and producing the knowledge that will result in a thriving civil society. For these reasons, higher education has a moral and social responsibility to rise to this challenge."**

American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment

# FACULTY INTENSIVE

## Critical Incident Questionnaire

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We concluded each day by asking participants to fill out an anonymous Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) containing the following questions:

- At what moment today were you most engaged as a learner?
- At what moment were you most distanced as a learner?
- What activities did you find most affirming or helpful?
- What activities did you find most puzzling or confusing?
- What surprised you most about today?

The purpose of the CIQ was to provide formative assessment data to the facilitators throughout the week so we could respond to any questions or confusions arising in the group, try to resolve any problems identified by participants, and adjust our plans to suit the needs of the group as we went along. A summary of the previous day's responses would be presented every morning, and the facilitators would address whatever issues had been raised.

Try it yourself right now. Pause for reflection and ask yourself these questions or a version of them.



### **Critical Incident Questionnaire**

*A simple evaluation tool to find out what and how students are learning.*

At the end of the day (or week, or unit, or other appropriate time period), set aside ten minutes for the group to respond in writing to a few specific questions. Tailor the questions to your specific interests and needs, but structure them to be open-ended and to elicit individual reactions to the material.

Keep all responses anonymous. Collect them at the end of the period.

Read and analyze the responses; group them according to similar themes or concerns.

Report back to the group at the next meeting. Allow time for comments and discussion.

*Adapted from Landis (Start Talking) and Brookfield and Preskill (Discussion as a Way of Teaching).*



## Reflection

“The Elders at the last of the generation,” says Illarion,” would come together and deliberate for months, asking themselves what wisdom they had learned in their generation and how it could be reflected in a story. Imagine doing that. If we could only impart some of our wisdom, what would we choose? How could we embody it in a story?

Can you imagine if our world leaders  
did that today?”