

# Difficult Dialogues

Some years ago, I was at a party at a private home in Anchorage. All the folks at the gathering were Alaska Native people: everyone except me. As I mingled through the crowd, I spotted Tlingit Elder Walter Austin sitting on the couch. We'd connected briefly once or twice before, but I wasn't sure he would remember me. So I approached him with a helpful "Hi. I'm Libby Roderick. We've met before."

"Yes," he said. "In 1492."

LIBBY RODERICK

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# FACULTY INTENSIVE

## Day Three

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When we asked our Native consultants what difficult dialogues they would most like to see us address, two surfaced again and again: institutional racism and the way research and science are practiced in their communities. These are both enormous topics with spiraling layers of complexity, and we knew we couldn't get very far with either of them, let alone both, in a single day. But we decided to honor them by giving it a try.

In this project, when we talk about institutional racism we mean the tendency of institutions to advantage certain people, ideas, and ways of thinking at the expense of others. That this happens is pretty obvious when you stop and think about it. The trouble is that most of academia doesn't stop and think about it very often. For just one day then, we wanted our non-Native Faculty Fellows to get a taste of institutional racism from an indigenous perspective; recognize some of the ways our university cultures and systems disregard and disadvantage Alaska Native peoples, ideas, and ways of knowing while advantaging those of the dominant culture; and notice how often we unintentionally collude with these practices as we go about our daily lives. We had introduced these concepts in our first Difficult Dialogues intensive with exercises related to the concept of white privilege. Today, we would bring it a bit closer to home.

The day's activities included a Fishbowl exercise in which Alaska Native colleagues shared their experiences of institutional racism at UAA, an interactive theatre activity in which we explored a scenario of conflict between two competing value systems, and a lengthy discussion of how Western science and research practices affect many Alaska Native communities. Oscar had written extensively in the latter arena, and Ilarion had devoted much of his career to promoting partnerships between Alaska Native communities and Western science practitioners. So we had two highly experienced and respected leaders to guide us through the discussion.

### Sample Agenda

Silence

Fishbowl Exercise

Interactive Theatre Activity

Walk Outside

Western Science and Research and  
Alaska Native Communities

Small Group Reflection

Group Work

Critical Incident Questionnaire

We anticipated the possibility of resistance to this material. Academics are privileged people within their cultures, and privileged people tend to see their own experience as reality and their advantages as both natural and right. "The dominant group is seen as the norm for humanity," says Beverly Daniel Tatum in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*. For people who are members of a dominant or

advantaged social group, the outside world reflects their “normalcy.” Inner experience and outer circumstances are in harmony with one another, and the image reflected by others is similar to the image within. “In the absence of dissonance, this dimension of identity escapes conscious attention.”

Members of a dominant group may not notice their own unearned advantages or the disadvantages of others, and they often feel criticized and defensive when those inequities are pointed out to them. “Dominant groups generally do not like to be reminded of the existence of inequality,” notes psychologist Jean Baker Miller in *Towards a New Psychology of Women*. The realization can produce uncomfortable feelings of guilt and/or a sense of responsibility to act.

We had great faith in the character and heart of our participants, but we still took measures to protect the confidentiality of the people who shared their stories. We planned a walk outside that could serve as a breather as well as an exercise.

We also began the day with our customary period of silence and ended it with time for reflection, group work, and the now familiar CIQs. By the end of the day, although we only scratched the surface of some very deep experiences, we could tell by the responses that our participants had been moved.

“I didn’t know,” they said. “How can we change this?”

## DIFFICULT DIALOGUE

# Institutional Racism in the Academy

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It's not too surprising that institutional racism was one of the difficult dialogues our Alaska Native colleagues wanted us to address. Alaska Native people see it and experience it almost every day. People in the dominant ethnic groups tend not to see it at all because the status quo tends to reflect their realities but few others.

Institutional racism occurs when the prevailing system of assumptions, practices, policies, biases, values, and patterns have the net effect of imposing negative and/or oppressive conditions on people of any ancestry other than the dominant ethnic group. Because the decision-making, economic, and political power in the U.S. lies largely in the hands of white people, institutional racism affects not only universities and colleges, but also the media, the banking system, religious institutions, and more. Eliminating it is a challenge for all citizens, not just those of us within academic communities.

We had introduced this topic in our first Difficult Dialogues intensive through the concept of white privilege as described by Peggy McIntosh, Ph.D., Senior Research Scientist and Associate Director of the Wellesley Centers for Women at Wellesley College. In her well-known piece *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, McIntosh lists dozens of things she as a white woman can take for granted on a daily basis that African-American colleagues at her workplace cannot. Here are a few:

- *I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.*
- *I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.*
- *I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.*
- *I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.*
- *I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person's voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.*
- *I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.*

“One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions,” says McIntosh. “They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant groups one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.”

Knowing that our participants had previously wrestled with this material and still come back for more, we decided they were ready to go deeper. This time we would show them some of the actual effects these invisible systems were having on their Alaska Native colleagues.

We were joined by six Alaska Native faculty and staff members who were willing to speak of their own experiences and their perception of Native students' experiences of institutional racism at UAA. We promised them confidentiality, with the understanding that their words would never be used without their permission. We didn't want their frankness to boomerang on them and result in hostility from any colleagues or supervisors who resented the implication that their own behaviors might be construed as racist. Our guests were painfully aware that their voices were in the minority and that their perspectives—particularly those involving inequity or bias—were usually suspect within the larger system. They were also aware of the tendency of their non-Native colleagues to become defensive at any suggestion of racism, in the system or in themselves.

For some Alaska Native people (and for many other people of color), academic life can be a struggle, a sometimes daily experience of being a stranger in a strange land. We emphasized this reality by setting up a Fishbowl format (also known as an Encircled Circle) with a small circle of chairs in the middle of the room and a much larger circle of chairs around it. Our guests occupied the center circle, sharing amongst themselves in response to questions posed by Ilarion. The rest of us encircled them, serving as respectful listeners and witnesses.



## Fishbowl

*A discussion configuration in which a small group of stakeholders discusses a topic in the center of a larger group of listeners. Especially useful for discussions of culture, heritage, and diversity.*

Arrange the room with a small group of people in the center and a larger group of listeners in a circle around them.

Prompt the inner circle with questions and allow them to freely discuss the topic or questions amongst themselves, while the people in the outer circle maintain a respectful silence, listen deeply, and observe non-verbal cues that carry meaning.

Bring the two groups into the same larger circle and allow them to discuss and ask each other questions.

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

For more than an hour, our colleagues and guests talked openly about their professional lives, their struggles with promotion and tenure, and how little support they get from academic institutions if they try to honor both worlds in which they live. They also spoke passionately about their Alaska Native students, and about communication strategies that make a difference for their success. A few issues and themes surfaced again and again.

**Lack of support.** Alaska Native faculty and staff often keenly feel their position on the outside of the university's inner circle of power and decision-making. "We have programs that are like diamonds in the rough," said one, "and we can't get enough institutional support or funding to polish them. We could be doing incredible, amazing things, and yet we're not allowed to. We can't grow. We can't develop. We're extremely limited, and that gets extremely frustrating"

**Tokenism.** "It's difficult being the only Alaska Native voice on most institutional boards and committees."

**Professional loneliness.** "There's always this awareness that if I get too angry or upset or vocal, then I'm perceived as the wild—bad—Indian. But if I don't say anything, then I'm the quiet passive Indian. Day by day you live under this constant pressure or fear."

**Priorities.** Their own priorities for how to do the best job frequently come into conflict with the priorities demanded by the university. They consider it valuable and necessary to spend time building relationships and trust—even just hanging out—with Alaska Native students. That, of course, takes considerable time away from work that the institution values more highly, such as writing and research. These faculty members also value research and writing, but they know it is the personal relationships that might keep Alaska Native students in school and lead to their success. Individual career ambitions often take second place to the wider concerns of their students and peoples. These priorities are often penalized by department chairs, deans, and promotion and tenure committees.

**Language.** The academy regards Alaska Native languages as interesting subjects for anthropological or linguistic studies, but does not recognize them as second languages for degree-seeking or promotion and tenure purposes. Several faculty members expressed their dismay when their ability to speak both English and a currently spoken indigenous language was considered insufficient to meet academic requirements; they were required to learn a third more "legitimate" language, such as French, German or Spanish. Colleagues for whom these languages were mother tongues faced no such requirement to acquire yet another language.

**Pacing and communication.** Most of the sharing at least touched on cultural differences in pacing and communication between Alaska Native peoples and academic culture. "My own personal bias is to go slow," said one faculty member. "I have to mull a lot before I speak. Yet even though it's not my natural cultural bent, I know I have to change that part of myself and learn to speak up more. I have to force myself to be more vocal, and that's difficult."

“Because [Alaska Native students’] speech patterns are slow and filled with important pauses,” said another, “they may have difficulty being heard. They may not jump in there. The relentlessly fast pace makes them feel like they don’t belong.”

“When something’s not quite right,” said a third, “they’ll find an indirect way of telling you. There will be a little pause, and they might say something neutral like, ‘That’s interesting.’ But that pause is telling the real story. If you don’t pick up on it, you’ll never find out what is on their minds.”

A fourth said, “In university settings, the clock and the content are all-important. When they become more important than student learning, then I think we have a problem. Institutional racism forces students out of learning.”

Several offered strategies that work in their own classrooms. “I like to give students time for thought and reflection,” said one. “If it’s something important that I really want them to think about, I don’t make them respond immediately. They might have until the next class period or over the weekend to think about it. This helps them learn in a culturally appropriate way. And the students love it. They say things like, ‘Ahhh...someplace I can be myself!’ and ‘Why aren’t more university classes like this?’”

**Promotion and tenure.** “I’m always aware that I’m not tenured. In fact, thinking over what I’ve said today, if it got to the wrong ears I know I could be in trouble. I could be let go. In my experience, Alaska Native faculty do not get tenure at the same rate as others. And that’s scary, you know? You go through the whole process, do everything, and you get to that point, and you don’t make it. How do you get to be one of the ones who does make it?”

**Healing.** Finally, they talked about the need to acknowledge the tensions and traumas related to our mutual history and the possibilities of beginning to build genuinely equitable, respectful relationships between academic and indigenous communities.

“Really,” said one, “in order for our people—us—to succeed, a whole lot of healing has to happen. If the universities would just acknowledge the traumas that have been inflicted on our people, admit to the holes in their base of information, and maybe turn a little research or funding to the problems, our Native students could collectively breathe a sigh of relief. Instead, we are constantly expected to assimilate. What if instead of losing ourselves we could be [respected for what we bring to the educational environment?] We might see more Native student success.”

Around the outer circle, many of the listeners were visibly moved. They had not understood how difficult it is for their Native colleagues to enter and survive, much less prosper in, the academic world. Briefly, they were shocked into silence.

Later in the day, they reflected via Critical Incident Questionnaires.

- *I loved the inner circle because it gave human shape to the experience of structural violence and internalized oppression that happens to real people each day in both subtle and overt ways. I needed to witness that.*
- *I appreciated the Fishbowl group explaining their experiences and feelings. What an incredible opportunity and privilege.*
- *Native faculty are feeling the effects of institutionalized racism much more than I had perceived.*
- *It hurts to witness even a small piece of the effects of oppression and ethnocentrism on the courageous, generous people who spoke of their experiences.*
- *Having the Alaska Native faculty (and staff) here today reminded me of those who are no longer here. I've only been here eight years, but I have personally known several Alaska Native faculty and staff who are not here anymore. They are gone for different reasons, sort of. But what it really comes down to is this institution's lack of commitment to Alaska Native issues.*

In a summary discussion later in the day, one non-Native participant put her reaction this way: "Sometimes I feel like I'm walking around with a sign on my back that says I'm an idiot. I don't know I have it, but everybody else can see it when I walk down the hall. I want to be able to get rid of that sign, but I don't know if I can. And I don't know how to ask you to help. Do we need more meetings like this one, or do you need to stop me in the hall and say, 'Hey, I gotta talk to you?' How do we make this stuff happen, outside of the circle today?"

Another non-Native answered. "It's not their responsibility," she said. "It's ours."

# On Anger

Libby Roderick

Like our faculty participants, most of the readers of this book will be familiar with oppression from a variety of standpoints, both theoretical and personal. But I'd like to pause for a moment and consider one of the things that was said in our discussion. One of the reasons we don't like to have difficult dialogues about racism is that so many people are sitting on so much anger. One of our Alaska Native guests articulated a Catch-22 of being in an oppressed group: "If I show my anger and frustration, I'm the wild, bad Indian. And if I don't, I'm the passive one."

I can't tell you how many times I've seen this in the work that I do. The minute an Alaska Native person reveals the slightest bit of frustration or anger, non-Native people will come up to me and say, "Gee. So-and-so doesn't like white people." Often, when Native or non-Native people express a Native perspective that is very different from a Western one (not necessarily better, just different), non-Native people feel attacked or criticized. It's very common for folks in the dominant culture to resist criticism and to feel attacked upon encountering a perspective that challenges the centrality of their own.

No one likes to feel assaulted, whether they are actually under attack or not. But the truth is that many people outside the dominant culture feel under siege in various ways every day. In the face of constant oppression, they learn not to show their anger because it doesn't help; it can just get you labeled a "wild, bad Indian." Many people take that incredible stress of being marginalized directly into their bodies, resulting in health issues. I've seen this during every workshop I've ever done, including this one. The back stories are vast indeed.

One of the great appeals of Alaska Native cultures for non-Native folks can be the teachings of compassion, gentleness, and humility. I hear the Elders all the time saying, "Meet hatred with love. Meet evil with good." This is obviously incredibly wise. At the same time, the African- American civil rights movement achieved the civil rights gains it did in part because people did not shut up. They let their anger show, even explode on occasion, and they pushed and pushed and pushed for equity. From what I've seen of most Alaska Native cultures, that would not be their way. I know people who have had appalling misdiagnoses or under-treatment within the Native medical system, yet they will not sue the system that failed them because that antagonistic approach is not the way. I've known people who've died from cancer that could have been prevented by cleaning up toxins left in a village, and I've heard their families say, "Don't turn this into a fight."

It's easy to appreciate the gentle qualities of Alaska Native cultures; those qualities are among their extraordinary gifts to the world. But I also encourage us to embrace and support and encourage the anger and the outrage that people should be expressing about what's going on. Let's be allies they can turn to, safe places for the expression of what is really going on, rather than people who turn away from the truth.

## EXERCISE

# Interactive Theatre

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As we had affirmed during our earlier Difficult Dialogues intensives, one of the best ways to help people “get” issues related to power and privilege is through interactive theater. We drew upon this approach again in an effort to help participants better understand the lived experience of unintentional institutional racism at our universities. As always, we had just a tiny bit of time, so our intention was simply to give faculty a taste of what our students might experience and an opportunity to discover how structural biases in our institutions can defeat even our best individual efforts.

After a reminder of the features of institutional racism and white privilege, we headed into the hands-on work. The exercise was led by Lauren Bruce, at that time Director of UAA’s faculty development center, who had considerable experience using interactive theatre to explore issues of power and privilege in higher education. She directed the participants into small groups of about five people each and asked them to share stories of institutional racism and white privilege within a university context. The stories could be based upon their own experiences or incidents they had witnessed or heard about. She encouraged the participants to focus on the heart of the stories, rather than going into extensive detail. She then asked them to zero in on a single story that held the most resonance for the group.



### **Interactive Theatre**

*Exercises in which participants act out the roles and points of view of various stakeholders in a conflict. Useful for exploring complex arguments between multiple stakeholders and potential outcomes of a variety of interventions.*

Identify a situation or scenario that participants might experience in their own classrooms or on their own campuses.

Assign roles, and ask participants to represent those views rather than their own.

Give audience members an option to interrupt the proceedings by saying “Freeze!” or a similar command.

Open up several of these moments for closer attention and alternate interventions.

Adapted from Augusto Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed

“Talk about one of the experiences you just heard,” she said. “Go right to the difficult dialogue, stripping out the things that lead up to it. Retell it as a story, but go straight to the crux of it. You can color it with what you’ve heard in other instances and add a little bit of your own knowledge. The important thing is to try and get to a point where some form of institutional oppression occurs. It could be to a student or to a faculty member; it could be in an on-campus or off-campus incident. Brainstorm and come up with one significant story for each group.”

After about ten minutes, the larger group reconvened to share these stories and to choose a single story that they would depict in a role play. The group picked a scenario in which two Alaska Native nursing students have asked to speak to their professor just hours before they are scheduled to take a final exam that plays a crucial role in the state licensing process. They have brought along a staff member to support them in the discussion.

Diane, playing one of the students, explains that the students do not feel they can take the test and still maintain a sense of cultural integrity. They know the answers they will be expected to give on the test, and some of them violate deeply held cultural beliefs. They are particularly upset about a question that asks for the proper protocol when treating cases of substance abuse. The “correct” answer requires them to state that they would administer a particular drug. From their perspective, based on their traditional cultural values, doing so would be unethical. Since they don’t believe that they can answer that question (and several others) honestly, they do not want to take the test.

Kimberly, playing the part of the faculty member, takes a calm but firm stance. The students were responsible for mastering certain practices, procedures, and rules, she explained, and they must demonstrate their competency in those requirements or they will fail. Granting an exception would do them no favors. It would only be kicking the can down the road. If they wish to obtain their licenses to work as nurses within the current system, she says, they were going to have to get used to these kinds of requirements as there will be many similar tests to follow. If their cultural beliefs interfere with their acceptance of standard Western medical practices, perhaps it was best to discover that now and consider choosing a different profession.

As the scenario reached this impasse, Lauren invited the participants to experiment with different possibilities for moving the interaction in other, possibly more productive or creative, directions. She indicated that people could adopt whatever roles they thought might bring fresh possibilities to the scenario: other faculty members, staff, administrators, students; even outside parties. With everyone looking on, several participants took turns inserting themselves into the discussion to see if they could shift the tone, defuse the tension, or broaden anyone’s perspective.

Jackie was first up, playing a colleague from the Nursing department. She took a seat, saying she was just passing down the hall and couldn’t help but overhear the exchange. Perhaps she might be helpful in reframing the discussion? As she launched into a suggestion about examining our own curriculum, Kimberly cut her off with a mock faint. Time was running out, she explained. These students needed to take the test right now. Long term curricular discussions weren’t going to change a thing.

“Was that working?” asked Lauren, and the room filled with head-shaking and murmurs of, “No”. “OK, does someone want to try something else?”

Trish came in next. Sitting down, she addressed Kimberly directly. “I understand the situation,” she said. “But what I want to know is, in your own words, what’s the consequence if they don’t take this test?”

Kimberly replied, “Well, if they don’t take the test, they won’t pass the course, and if they don’t pass the course they won’t advance to get their licensing or their degree. They have to do this. It’s not an option. I think it’s great if they want to bring their cultural perspective into the discussion, but we live in a Western world, and these are the rules.”

Trish said next, “OK, I want to hear from the students. What outcome would you two like to see here?”

Keeping her head down to avoid direct eye contact (a gesture of respect in many Native cultures), Diane said, “I know what the government wants, but I don’t think it’s right to give people these drugs.”

Kimberly, doing a fine job of playing a faculty member deeply invested in the dominant culture, interrupted. “You don’t get to decide that. That’s the doctor’s call.”

“Is there another way you could show that you have mastered the knowledge from the course?” asked Trish, trying to draw a solution from the students.

“I could do a blood draw and show that I can administer antibiotics. But not that other drug. I think it’s not good practice, and I just can’t do it,” Diane replied.

As Kimberly started to respond again, Lauren intervened. “OK,” she said. “I think we can see where this is going. This is another way to approach it, but Kimberly is making it very hard to reach agreement!” There was general laughter as Kimberly took a bow. She had been prepped by Lauren to stay firm in her defense of the academic rules.

Bettina was the next one to try. She acknowledged the students, the staff member, and the faculty member individually, but before she could get very far, Kimberly erupted again. “Look, this issue is not going to go away. It’s going to come up again and again and again...” Bettina got to her feet and crossed the room, trying to steer Kimberly out of the room, to physically break the dynamic that was consuming the discussion.

“Freeze,” several people called out, which was their mechanism for stopping the action and allowing another person to experiment with a new response. Bettina bowed out. All the while, Diane, Ann (the other student) and Randi (the staff member, who is herself Alaska Native) sat quietly.

“This is a really good example of a common Native way of dealing with confrontation,” said Randi, in her role as the accompanying staff member. “I was here to advocate for the students, but I didn’t say very much, because I can’t think in these situations. A lot of times we miss our opportunities to be really effective because we can’t think that fast. That’s part of why we feel that we’re on the front lines all the times, that we have to get armored up just to go to work.”

Ilarion raised his hand, indicating he’d like to try another approach. Stepping forward, he paused behind the guest chair. “Hello,” he said. He waited until each person in the circle acknowledged him. “I thought I might help. Would you mind if I sat down?” He was the first person who asked permission and waited to receive it before joining the group. The pause had a noticeable effect in slowing down the pace of the scenario.

“Well I was just thinking,” he said, “since I’m a senior faculty member...” There was laughter as everyone realized he was asserting rank over his faculty “colleague.” “I was thinking it might be possible to arrange to speak to the Dean,” he said, kicking it up another notch. “That might take some time to arrange, but in the meantime,” he turned to the students, “would you consider taking the test, since you won’t have to actually administer the meds but just answer a few questions about them? Would that work for you?”

Ilarion’s approach was the first to slow down the momentum of Kimberly’s objections, and Lauren pointed out how that might be due to an unequal power dynamic, which was the only way in which the faculty member felt she could legitimately yield. Undercurrents of power run beneath all confrontational situations, of course; this approach only made them overt. “Of course it might have worked differently if Kimberly was the senior faculty member,” said Lauren. “We might have explored that dynamic as well.”

Claudia was the last to join the scenario. She tried a compassionate plea spoken directly to the students. Leaning forward, folding her hands, she looked them in the eye and said “I just want to say that there have been many times in my life, as a student, as a practicing psychologist, and as a faculty member, when I have had to learn something that violated what I had understood before, something I didn’t want to believe, that I didn’t even trust. But learning those things has made me a better person. It can actually be a positive thing. It can make you be a stronger, more educated person.”

“You see what she’s doing?” said Lauren. “She’s attempting to be a bridge between the faculty member and the faculty member’s role in trying to educate the students, and the students who don’t see that bridge at all.”

“So you can see,” Lauren concluded, “that there are lots of ways to explore this. Bettina tried to take the faculty member out of the situation, which I thought was a very valid response. We could have explored that separately—what goes on outside the presence of the students and the staff member. How do you speak to somebody like the person Kimberly was playing? How do you reach a person taking that stance? If we had more time, we could have explored that question over and over again. There are other things you can do as well. You could be the

inner voice of, say, Kimberly.” She stood behind Kimberly, arranged her face in an exaggerated expression of disgust, and said “Oh my gawd! Another faculty member is trying to tell me what to do!” We laughed.

“Or you might be the inner voice of the other student, the one who said nothing.” She stepped behind Ann, and made her voice very small. “I just feel so bad...” She took another step sideways. “Or the inner voice of Randi, the staff member, thinking ‘where is my director?’”

We batted around possibilities and ideas for a while longer, until nearly everyone had contributed in some way. Finally, Lauren called for last comments, and several attempted to summarize their thoughts.

“The whole time we were going through these scenarios,” said Claudia, “the only thing I was thinking about was how to get the students to take the exam. Not any of the other stuff, but that they actually went and took the exam. Because what I’ve seen too often is that you two” she spoke directly to Ann and Diane in their roles as students, “would get up, leave, and not come back. That’s the biggest thing. That’s the thing that’s the most dangerous here. Sometimes students learn that the only way out is...out. And that’s what I kept thinking about. What could I do or say to get them to stay?”

There are many concerns and issues embedded in this simple storyline, and the multitude of similar stories that occur each day on our campuses. In this example, two students felt at odds with the test requirements, and the instructor was insistent that they comply with the dominant system’s demands. The stakes were fairly high on both a material and a personal level. If they chose the “correct” answer, they would be violating their cultural beliefs and affirming what their cultural intuition told them is an unethical practice; if they didn’t, they might sacrifice graduation and a lifelong career.

Native students report facing these kinds of conflicts in many different classes and disciplines, from business to anthropology, history to political science. Similar Catch-22 situations occur over and over again for Alaska’s Native peoples off campus as well. Fishermen may be forced to choose between following Western fishing regulations or feeding their hungry families. Village leaders may be forced to follow Western resource extraction regulations even when that compliance threatens the safety of subsistence harvesting within their region. Native people are required to conform to Western research processes even though such practices violate cultural protocols and leave a wake of negative feelings and compromised relationships.

Through this one small example, then, our faculty participants grappled with a situation that repeats itself many times over in interactions between Western institutions and indigenous peoples. However unwittingly, our institutions do in fact bias one set of values and practices over another, and we teach our students these systems every day.

Is there something we can or should be doing about this?

## EXERCISE

# Honoring Different Perceptions of Reality

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One of the biggest challenges our Native consultants mentioned was the tendency for those in the dominant culture to think they have a lock on “reality” and that other views of reality are at best “alternative” and at worst inferior or just plain wrong. Most of us can easily see the problems with other views; we just don’t tend to see the problems with our own.

A Mi’kway educator from Nova Scotia, cited in Marie Battiste’s book *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision*, observes that “the most serious problem with the current system of education lies not in its failure to liberate the human potential among Aboriginal peoples but in its quest to limit thought to cognitive imperialistic policies and practices... Cognitive imperialism denies people their language and cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture, and one frame of reference.”

To introduce this idea, Ilarion often uses a short exercise that demonstrates how differently a group of people can experience the same reality. He displays a simple sentence and asks participants to count the “f’s” in it. The sentence reads, “Finished files are the result of years of scientific study combined with the experience of many years of experts.”

He’s used this same example in many different groups including at the White House Conference on the Oceans. The answers typically range from one to nine. “The range of responses shows us that we can be looking at the same thing, but seeing something quite different,” he says. “We see what we expect to see and ignore things that our brains tell us don’t matter, such as the word “of.” This is confirmed in every setting in which this exercise is tried. It happens because of the brain’s ability to screen out information it considers extraneous in order to focus on a central point.”

In this instance, there is in fact a correct answer. There are seven “f’s” in the sentence, and all of us can see them when their location is brought to our conscious attention. This is how it works when there are verifiable facts on the ground upon which we can eventually, if not immediately, agree.

But what happens when there are disputes about the facts or the data, when we cannot agree on what is actually true? In these cases, Native wisdom counsels that it is better to proceed with respect for all viewpoints.

“In the long term,” says Ilarion, “respecting each other is more effective than battling over who is right or trying to prove others wrong. Relationships are central and all perceptions of a situation can be valuable. The Elders say we get the best decisions and outcomes when we honor the

different perceptions amongst us, protect people's sense of importance within the group, and preserve the integrity of our relationships with one another. Native peoples teach that being impeccable in our process with one another will lead to an outcome that far surpasses that which could be accomplished by an individual alone. Competition over who is right will stop us in our tracks. Working together with dignity and respect will lead us to a better result."

**What happens when there are disputes about the facts or the data, when we cannot agree on what is actually true? In these cases, Native wisdom counsels that it is better to proceed with respect for all viewpoints. Competition over who is right will stop us in our tracks. Working together with dignity and respect will lead us to a better result.**



### **Count the F's**

*A short exercise that demonstrates how differently people may experience the same reality.*

Display the following sentence and ask people to count the number of "f's" it contains:

Finished files are the result of years of scientific study combined with the experience of many years of experts.

Ask for a show of hands: How many see three? Four? Five? Six? Seven? Eight? Nine?

Use this as a springboard for discussion. What's going on here?

Adapted from Ilarion (Larry) Mercurieff.

## DIFFICULT DIALOGUE

# Balancing Science with Traditional Knowledge and Wisdom

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In the afternoon we introduced the second difficult dialogue of the day. This one involves conflicts between the worldviews and practices of Western science and those of traditional indigenous cultures. What makes it so difficult to engage is how lop-sided the two sides are with regard to power, prestige, and privilege.

Science and research are dominant forces in the modern world, and the institutions that practice them enjoy a privileged position in terms of funding, influence, and public perception. Although this is slowly changing, many scientist and researchers show little interest in, understanding of, or respect for the ways of learning about and living within the natural world practiced by indigenous cultures. When Western forms of science and research are insensitively practiced in and imposed upon Native communities, they can harm the inhabitants of those communities.

### **The Differences: Goals, Methods, Outcomes**

This is a complex subject with many important nuances and threads, and this discussion will of necessity be abridged. But, as previously noted, there are several fundamental differences between the educational practices of traditional Alaska Native cultures and today's higher education culture. Central to Western educational systems is the quantitative scientific research paradigm. Central to traditional Alaska Native educational systems is the qualitative experiential observation system that centers around a non-quantifiable experience of connectedness to the web of life. This is often referred to by Native educators as "spirituality." Native traditions view the experience of being connected to and a student of all creation as central to the educational process. Higher education doesn't even have a good word for this.

These two ways of attempting to understand the world have different goals. Scientists seek to understand, explain, and predict the natural world. They want to understand how things work and to create technologies to better human lives. Practitioners of traditional knowledge and wisdom seek to understand, adapt to, and live in balance within the natural world so that all human and more-than-human worlds can flourish in perpetuity.

Although Ilarion has spoken about this issue on many occasions, we decided to share an outside voice for this book as a way of linking our local Alaska Native experience with that of other indigenous peoples in North America. Dennis Martinez is Co-Chair of the Indigenous Peoples'

Restoration Network, an organization dedicated to supporting Native and tribal communities in environmental restoration, cultural rehabilitation, and the application of traditional ecological knowledge. He has advocated for indigenous perspectives through forty years of work in resource and knowledge protection, climate change, forest restoration, and projects bridging Western science with traditional ecological knowledge. He spoke at a national conference in 2008, organized by a society for the advancement of Chicano and Native American scientists.\*

“Just as traditional knowledge and culture is the context for traditional ecological knowledge,” says Martinez, “so Western culture is the context for Western science. Western science developed historically within an increasingly secular and materialistic culture without spiritual, reciprocal obligations to the natural world, [one] that views nature as without spirit. It is reductionist, not holistic. It is linear, not circular. It is product more than process. Nature is divided into its component parts in order to gain a large measure of control for technological innovations and development as well as for the verification or falsification of hypotheses through replicable empirical experiments for predictions of natural phenomena in short intervals of time and space.”

In other words, according to Martinez, Western science seeks to understand nature at least in part in order to control it. It is a powerful tool, he acknowledges, but “the kinds of questions Western science asks or doesn’t ask of nature are culturally determined to a large degree, and it is a quantitative tool that operates in a spiritual and non-Western cultural and historical vacuum. Tools can be used for the benefit or the detriment of the world. Science has done both. The same scientific toolkit can be used to benefit Indigenous peoples as well. But its technology has also led to the poisoning of our waters and lands and has had, more often than not, a devastating effect on our health.”

Western science strives for objectivity, to “reduce or eliminate biases, prejudices, or subjective evaluations by relying on verifiable data.”\*\* Much of its practice maintains a strict separation between observer and observed that is intended to ensure the resulting data won’t be limited by human senses or contaminated by personal or political agendas or biases.

Traditional knowledge and wisdom relies on the centrality of the observer’s intimate relationship to and experiential knowledge of a particular place and ecosystem. Traditional knowledge systems use keen observation and direct personal experience by a community of data-gatherers to gain critical information from the environment, through sustained intimate relationship with a particular place over a long period of time.

In some important ways, the two are not so very different. “A competent Indigenous hunter, fisher, farmer, or pastoralist,” says Martinez, “like a competent Western field researcher, uses the same human powers of observation, inductive and deductive logic, pattern recognition, skepticism of second- and third-hand information, nuanced judgment, imagination, open mindedness, inference and prediction, inquisitiveness, creativity, intuition, and honesty, as well as a willingness to experiment and a sense of wonder. All humans adapt to their world by remembering and learning. Indigenous peoples have the advantage of a much longer collective memory and a longer time frame for learning.”

\* Transcribed in *Changes We Have Seen*

\*\* <http://www.businessdictionary.com>

However, because traditional knowledge and wisdom is not derived from quantitative methodologies or written up in peer-reviewed journals, most Western researcher and policy-makers consider it to be subjective, merely anecdotal, and therefore highly suspect. Although more and more individuals have become open to traditional knowledge in recent years, most governmental policy is required by law to be based in the “best available science.” Because the scientific culture largely dismisses traditional knowledge, thousands of years of data and local expertise is often ignored or marginalized.

“Local people,” says Martinez, “directly dependent on their environment for subsistence livelihoods and possessing long term environmental knowledge—in other words, local environmental baselines with which to track change—know their places far better than the scientist whose research schedule is set by the academic calendar, bound by the vagaries of boom-and-bust foundation and institutional funding, and vulnerable to the phenomenon of shifting baselines.”

By and large, indigenous communities appreciate the benefits of the Western scientific objective approach. They appreciate its technological and methodological gifts and are grateful for many of the advances it has produced, especially within the medical realm. As long as its limitations are recognized and its applications are both equitable and used to preserve rather than destroy the web of life, most indigenous people value what Western science brings to the table. They are particularly intrigued with the creativity and new thinking that might emerge if Western scientists and Native thinkers truly worked together to address some of the challenges facing humanity and the natural world at this point in time.

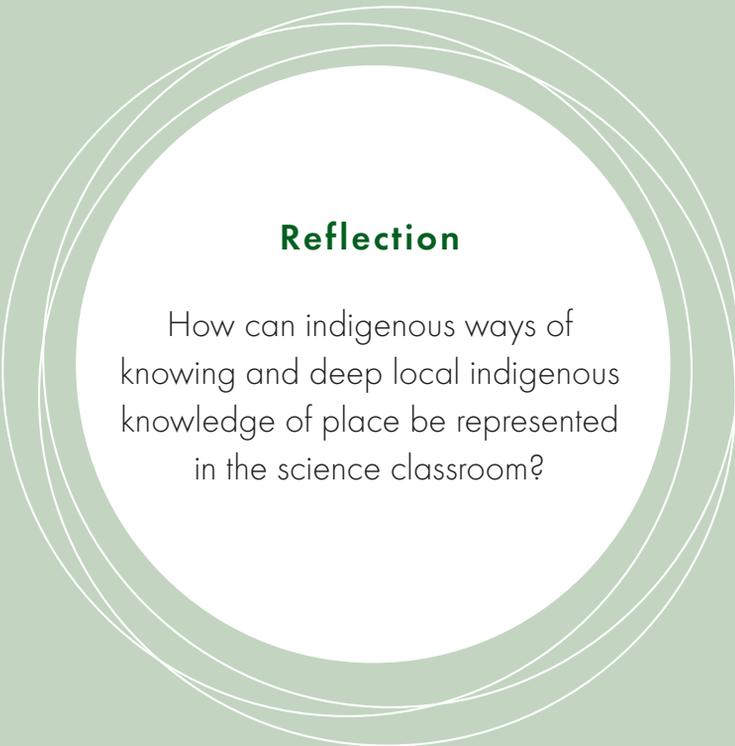
What they object to is the disrespect many (but by no means all) practitioners of Western science show towards indigenous communities and traditional ways of knowing. They resent the marginalization and dismissal by scientists and others who consider their knowledge and wisdom to be merely anecdotal. They object to efforts to integrate, merge, or incorporate indigenous ways of knowing into the dominant approach, as these verbs reinforce the hegemony of the dominant paradigm. Instead, they argue for balancing the two approaches—one with a global focus, the other with a local orientation—and partnering between two complementary rather than competitive systems. “Collaboration between Western and Indigenous experts is about balancing knowledge that is locally contextualized with generalized scientific knowledge, not in the abstract or in literature, but sitting down together as equal partners in integrated discussion scenarios and hashing things out,” says Martinez.

This effort to create partnerships and to view the two systems as complementary has been an uphill battle in educational and scientific institutions. Although traditional knowledge and wisdom has been gaining ground over the past two decades, Martinez points out that “when traditional knowledge is taught... it happens in spite of the dominant education convention that, while traditional knowledge is a cultural treasure, it is not relevant to a science education in the modern world... For non-tribal schools, traditional knowledge is an optional anthropological oddity... Western science is the only universally valid epistemology... While the preservation and revitalization of Indigenous knowledge is beginning to happen on a global scale, it is still not

represented in Western science curricula. It is not yet recognized as an epistemology in its own right or as complementary and empowering to a student's science education and career."

## **The Opportunities: Towards Cooperation and Collaboration**

This short discussion only scratches the surface of all the things to be explored, honored, wrestled with, and worked out between representatives of these two vast and varied communities. Ilarion has addressed many audiences over the years, and he speaks often of the need for dialogue between indigenous leaders and Western scholars, scientists, and researchers. "I challenge educational institutions to join this conversation," he says. "For the good of us all."



### **Reflection**

How can indigenous ways of knowing and deep local indigenous knowledge of place be represented in the science classroom?

# Nature is our Textbook

Angayuqaaq “Oscar” Kawagley

*Late in the afternoon, Ilarion invited Oscar to muse with us about science, Alaska Native ways of knowing, and the tension between them. Oscar brought a lifetime of experience to these topics, including a Ph.D. in Education. He coined the term “ecosophy” to describe the process of searching for wisdom from nature.*

Many years ago, when I was teaching, I found out a lot of Native students were failing my classes. I liked teaching science and math because they were so easy to grade, eh? But I really wanted to change the way I was teaching, and what I teach now is mainly ecosophical. I haven't given a test for twenty or twenty-five years. I'd rather do it in some other way, try to make it a little more palpable and be more accommodating to the students.

But that really started me thinking about teaching science. And what is science? I dwelt on that for quite a long time. And so I got away from the science kits and everything else that I used to use, and I'd get the students to go out into the community and collect wires and things like that, whatever we would find along the way, and then we'd make up our own little science experiments, maybe in electricity or something like that. And going out in the springtime, out on the creeks and marshes and picking up frog eggs and bringing them into the classroom and watching them. We had a lot of fun doing that.

The idea of science really bothered me a lot. I have a background in biological science, and finally I came to the determination that the subsistence way of life is a form of science too, as well as a constant reminder of the principles of living in harmony with nature. We Alaska Native people have science. We had to have it in order to live successfully for many thousands of years in spite of all the changes going on around us.

And, boy, was it harsh where I grew up! We had nine months of winter, and very short summers. In fact, we had six seasons, because we considered the time going from winter into the spring as one of those seasons, where terrific changes take place. And then spring happens, the melting of the snow, the flora and the fauna coming back, and so on. And then we have another one, from summer changing into fall. So we had six seasons, fifteen moons.

And so I surmised that we had a science, which is nothing more than a curiosity to know why things happen the way they do. The subsistence way of life is close to an embodiment of spiritual values...a constant reminder that you give the utmost respect to everything in the natural world. Knowing their habits and habitats, that required a lot of keen observation.

I've heard some of our Elders say that nature is our textbook. And it very much is. It's a living textbook. And that's why our Native sciencing is a very gentle sciencing, because it's very visual. You don't put anything into the sod house to study it; you study it right where it's at.

*Here he made a cupping shape with his right hand and patted it on the imaginary ground.*

And that really makes for a good deep knowledge. Now, our knowledge is not perfect. Not perfect. And that's why I say we have to pay attention to the new theories and discoveries of the modern scientific world. Because our knowledge is not perfect. There is still room for more...

We also think that intelligence, knowledge, and skills have a spirit. Can you imagine that? They have a spirit, and therefore they are living. When I was teaching science and mathematics the way I was taught [in Western schools], I was contributing to the oppression of the Native-ness of the Native students. Because in assimilative education, in order to be successful, the spirit of the intelligence, the spirit of the knowledge, the spirit of the skill has been removed. And you become like anybody else. You don't give a darn about the world and its condition.

And that's not a good state to be in. I was in that state for a long time, for at least twenty years, where I never gave credit to my people, nor myself, for knowledge from my own perspective that could be worthwhile in the modern world.

[We used] very keen observation over a long period of time. I love to tell about Matthew Bean, who died about seven years ago. He was a high school graduate from Mt. Edgecumbe' who studied the Hudson Bay over a twenty year period. He didn't photograph, he didn't take samples, didn't catalogue things or anything like that.

*He paused, leaned forward, tapped his forehead.*

"Boy, all committed to memory. Very subtle changes over a twenty year period. And then he began to talk about it and he said, "You know, it's gotta be acid snow. Because look at these changes that have taken place."

And finally a couple of Fish and Wildlife people noted what he was saying, and a couple of people from the Association of Village Council Presidents started talking with a couple of scientists from the University of Alaska. And finally one winter they sent the scientists out to Bethel to sample some of our snow, and sure enough, there was acid snow. But you can see that this was very keen observation over a very long period of time. Twenty years is a long time to be observing something like that and the very subtle changes that take place.

That's what ecosophy means, searching for wisdom from nature. As I mentioned before, Mother Earth has a culture and it's a Native culture. And therefore we have to emulate Mother Earth. Ways to teach us, problem-solving, generation of new knowledge, and things like that are all in nature. All we have to do is pay attention to nature. I've heard some of our Elders say that nature is our textbook. And it very much is. It's a living textbook.

You [Western scientists] have the guidance, you have the organization, and you have the design for making your own study. And we have our own way of doing research, looking at things. And what does the scientist do? He asks the questions, eh? And so do we.

And I keep saying that our knowledge is not perfect. Neither is scientific knowledge perfect. And boy, we have a lot to share between the two ways of knowing. And we've got to find ways to make them meld, work with each other. Because my knowledge is imperfect, and theirs is imperfect...boy, how much more powerful can it get when you meld the two ways of knowing together.

*He spread his fingers wide, palms facing each other, and then slowly intertwined the fingers, letting them form an X. Breaking his hands back apart, he formed two open fists and shook them gently.*

Oh, but the ideas behind them are different, eh? Boy, they sure are... You know sometimes you make a model of it, but then Mother Earth doesn't fit perfectly; no it does not. Well after all, how can they include all the parameters to make it a perfect model, eh? They can only take so many little characteristics and include them in the model. And so, because it doesn't have all the information, it's imperfect. We have to work toward reducing the tension between our ways of knowing and the Euro-American ways of knowing.

Last month I was at Rankin Inlet for a meeting on wildlife management. Boy, talk about tension between the Inuit people and the Euro-American scientists. And you'd see some of those Inuit people getting fundamentalistic in their own thinking: "Our way is the only way." And of course the other side [was saying], "Well, we know so much more than you do." And one of the points of contention for the Inuit was going out into the "wild" and shooting at the caribou and other animals to put them to sleep, so they can weigh them, take blood samples, and other samples. And the Inuit were saying, "What effect does that chemical you are shooting into that animal have upon us who consume the moose and the caribou? Now cancer (and other diseases, but especially cancer) is so prevalent amongst our Native people. What kind of effect does that have?"

And there was no answer. But I was glad to see one young Inuit with a master's degree in microbiology. There was this young Native guy who knew all the use of the very sophisticated technological tools to study the various animals. We don't have those. That is a weakness of ours; we don't have these technological tools to be able to give us detailed knowledge about, for instance, contaminants. And we know there are contaminants out there. All you have to do is read a few magazines and read about disposing of your TV, into your back yard or into the dump. Just in the screen there are chemicals, often carcinogenic. And what happens when the screen breaks in the dump? Well, it trickles down into the ground. Boy, it's really a big problem, especially in the lowlands, seeping into our lakes and into our streams and into our rivers.

Right now, the biggest worry that we have is climate change. Because already the landscape is beginning to confuse and in some ways obfuscate our own identity. Because the landscape forms the mindscape. And that's worrisome. Because we have to deal with it as Native people, eh? And we know there will be invasive plants and animals, and a lot of them will take root very readily, because the ecological system has already been weakened. And when that happens and they replace some of the native plants and animals, whatever new plant comes, whatever new animals come, we're going to have to set up a new relationship with those new things. New rituals, new ceremonies. Oohhh. That kind of blows my mind.

And I often think because I live close to the coast...the seal. Boy, if that disappears a lot of our people are going to be really, really hurt...what is going to happen if those seals disappear?... Wow. It's always been with us. Seal meat, dried seal meat, seal oil, always has been with us. And all of a sudden, it's gone. Boy, what does that do to us psychologically?

*He pointed to his head.*

All these changes. And it behooves us as a Native people to really pay attention. Although the modern sciences are slowly coming about and beginning to recognize and to work with us. There's still a long way to go.

Many hundreds of years ago you had sciences that recognized that everything was living. But along came Copernicus, Descartes...the separation of mind and body, eh? Because there needed to be a change in the mindset to accommodate the political as well as the economic world. And so all of a sudden the universe became clockwork. Mother Earth and the solar system became clockwork. Then you can do anything that you want to, with the natural resources of Mother Earth. But we have a people that are very close to the land and never changed. Oh, there are a few of us that have become confused and had lost the spirit of intelligence to knowledge and skills and have become just like anybody else, don't give a darn about what happens to the world.

There has to be a consciousness change. Remember what I said? That the totality of the universe is consciousness. And so there has to be a consciousness change in order to accommodate physical change.

*He gestured to Libby, and asked "Am I going over time?" It had been 45 minutes, and his mouth was getting dry. "Pepsi would be good," he said. We took a short break while someone fetched him a glass. We sat in silence while he drank. "Boy that emptied my mind!" He laughed.*

But I think [what matters is] the sharing between the two. Our greatest gift is going to be living in harmony with nature. And I think I mentioned the fact that the subsistence way of life encourages one to become altruistic. Giving the utmost respect to every living thing, including the amoeba and everything else, because they do their job equally well, that's the egalitarian system. And that is the most important thing.

But the white people went off on a tangent away from living in harmony with nature about three hundred years ago for political and economic reasons. But it looks like they're starting to bend, eh?

We can contribute a lot to the Euro-American science, and we need to borrow a lot, a lot of detailed information which we have rudimentary knowledge of. You can tell us what to do with that cadmium that we find on the dump, what the source is, and what we might be able to do to try to do away with it. So we have a lot of ways to help each other. But boy, if they became one? Look how much more powerful our sciences are going to be.

## DIFFICULT DIALOGUE

# Spirituality and Education

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A third difficult dialogue that we hinted at but did not directly address revolves around the role of spirituality in education. As we mentioned earlier, many Native people use this word to convey the experientially-based sense of connection to the world that is at the heart of Native life and learning. At one point or another, most of the Alaska Native thinkers involved in shaping and guiding this project talked about spirituality as a centerpiece of traditional Alaska Native education.

The mere mention of spirituality tends to raise hackles in most U. S. academic settings. Many academics conflate the term with Western-style religion or associate it with New Age practices and other ill-defined, eclectic self-exploration and self-improvement systems. The long, complicated, and challenging relationship between the academy and religion is an extremely interesting area, but far beyond the scope of this book.

For our purposes, suffice it to say that when Alaska Native people speak of traditional spirituality they are referring to something that involves neither religion nor Western self-exploration philosophies or practices. They understand spirituality to be the embodied personal and collective experience of a living, reciprocal relationship between the natural and human worlds. It is a deep sense of being actively connected to, informed by, and participating in life along with rivers, winds, trees, creatures, other people, sounds, smells, fish, plants, and so on. It is an embodied process and experience rather than a belief. Perhaps most foreign to a Western-educated mind, human beings are not considered the center of creation or the peak of the life form pyramid, but simply one species among many.

It is the ultimate goal of traditional Alaska Native education to produce human beings who move within and operate from this profound, humble, and ever-changing relationship to life's human and more-than-human communities. The educational goal is to improve the intellectual skills of the next generation and to create whole human beings capable of engaging in self-regulating processes of right relationship with the natural and social worlds that support their existence so that all may flourish. This requires well-developed intellectual and physical skills; it also requires the ability to quiet the mind and access other, deeper, more holistic capacities and sources of information and wisdom.

The indigenous spiritual orientation involves the individual on all levels (mental, emotional, physical, kinesthetic, aural, environmental, etc.) as an integrated system that goes beyond the sum of its parts and extends beyond the Western boundaries of the self. Most especially, as many Native speakers have tried to convey, it involves dropping out of the relentless thought process that defines much of modern Western life and accessing more global capacities for awareness.

“Alaska Native people had to have a profound, intimate connection to all of creation,” says Ilarion, “in order to survive and thrive in often harsh conditions for ten thousand years.”

Traditional ways of knowing are not thought-centered. In fact, a prerequisite for this way of knowing is to fall completely out of thought. “I can sit for hours waiting for a sea lion to come without a single thought coming through my mind,” says Ilarion. “Modern Western society centers intelligence in one place only: in the brain. But our Elders tell us that the brain is all about the past or the future, never the now. We need to slip out of our thoughts in order to be present in the now. This is one reason we learn from the animals, because the animals are profoundly present. We watch them closely and see how they use their innate intelligence to live and survive and thrive. This is how we begin to feel spirit in all things. But as soon as I slip into my brain, I disconnect from everything else: my body, my being, my relationship to animals and other people and the earth. The Elders say that when we separate from our bodies, we separate from All That Is. That’s why we separate from each other as well.”

This methodology is impossible to measure in a quantitative way (although aspects of it can be monitored or approximated); indeed, it is not even easily communicated. This is a way of being in and knowing the world, an intimate relationship between a group of human beings and a specific place over a long period of time, a learned practice of keenly attending to, learning from and adapting to the world outside of the “self” through the senses rather than through measurement, and using awareness rather than narrowly defined thoughts and words.

Western science, with its primarily intellectual orientation, prioritization of eliminating emotional and other biases, and focus on explaining natural processes from the outside, is naturally skeptical of the data that comes from this qualitative approach. Science is based on an understanding that human beings cannot rely on our limited senses alone for accurate data; many realities of the universe are counterintuitive and ungraspable by the limited human senses. Perceiving and understanding such realities often requires highly abstract mathematical calculations, universal theories, technologies that vastly expand the reach of the human sensory capacities, and a detachment from the results (as opposed to an intimate, life-or-death, relationship to them). From this perspective human subjectivity only threatens to distort otherwise objective data. Any suggestion of spirituality at the center of education can appear anathema to those who respect only phenomena that can be tested, measured, analyzed, and used as a basis for prediction.

The two approaches are not necessarily destined for eternal conflict; they can also function in important complementary ways. A growing number of scientists argue that our understanding of any particular place or species can best be served by a blending of the data derived from intimate contact with the complex workings of that place or species over thousands of years and the data derived from the more detached Western scientific investigation into aspects of the place or species over shorter periods of time.

On an Alaska public radio program devoted to the relationship between traditional knowledge and Western science,\* Craig George, Senior Wildlife Biologist for the North Slope Borough Department of Wildlife Management, spoke of the many similarities between local/traditional knowledge and science, citing as an example a question about bowhead whales.

*One of the more interesting things we stumbled on is this question of whether bowheads are capable of smelling in air. That came up with respect to offshore oil and gas rigs. The local knowledge was clearly that whales were capable of smell, but you pick up any textbook on cetaceans and it will say that they are incapable. We worked with a really good whale anatomist and got permission to take apart a whale skull and, sure enough, found olfactory bulbs are present. In fact, they're fairly large. Genetic techniques showed that the olfactory genes are active. It was pretty clear that they are capable of smelling.*

He expressed his respect for traditional knowledge and went on to celebrate the possibilities of partnership.

*Both are the collection of empirical data over time, tested through time and updated. In that sense, the observations made here by the whaling community are clearly science. We've really benefited from that, and we are light years ahead doing our whale population abundance work by sitting on hundreds of years of local knowledge. It's so exhilarating when the scientific convergences occur, when you get some deep knowledge such as the whale's sense of smell and you confirm it with anatomy and physiology work. It's really exciting.*

Given that a “spirituality” based on intimate connection with the natural world is absent from Western science and education and central to Native ways of knowing, there is clearly much to be gained from a reciprocal relationship between the two ways of knowing. At the very least, scientists and educators might learn more about the Native regard for all of life, and Native people might see more benefits from Western scientific and educational efforts. At the most, who can say how this might change the way things are done to the benefit of all?

Indigenous ways have held up for millennia. Maybe, just maybe, Western education and science and this kind of spirituality can co-exist.

\*”Talk of Alaska,” KSKA, Alaska Public Radio, April 9, 2013

# We Are One

Ilarion Mercurieff

I learned the Aleut way of hunting as a meditation and a spiritual practice. The Aleut hunter suspends ego for group cohesion and hunting success. He defers to the most experienced hunter in the group. Even if we all fired a killing shot at the sea lion, we all knew whose bullet struck the animal first. This hunter gets first pick of the meat. I watched as the hunters all worked to retrieve the sea lion, taking turns cutting the carcass, then dividing up the parts in roughly equal portions, no matter how many hunters were present. And I knew that each hunter gave meat to others before his own family, especially the elderly and widows.

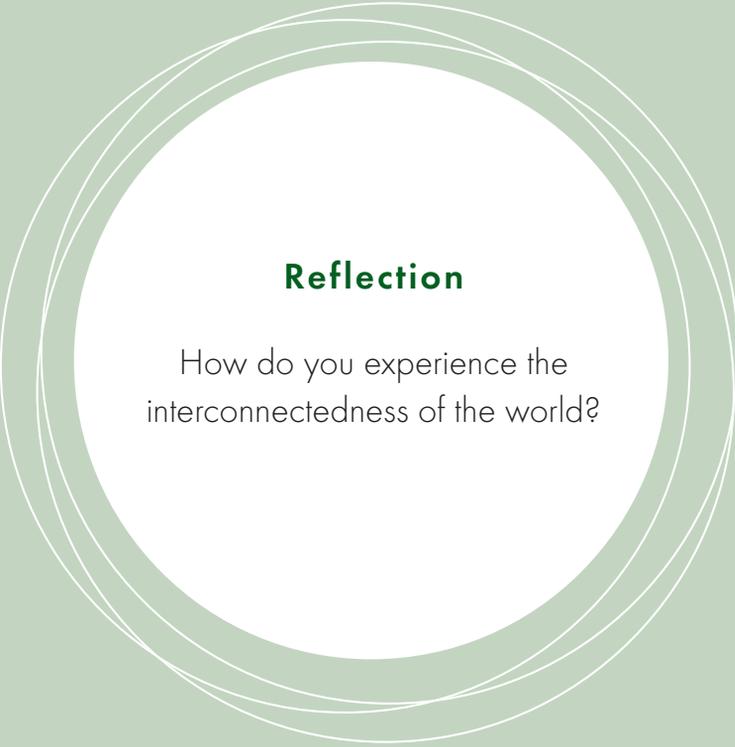
As I connected more deeply with other hunters, I also learned to connect more deeply with all of life. Aleut hunters know that when we take an animal we are killing another conscious being. We are taught to revere all life and all life forms. All life has the same spirit we do. It comes from the same place, the same source: *Agox* (the Maker or Creator).

It is one thing to understand the concept of sacredness (with your head) and another thing entirely to experience it with your whole being. I was eleven years old the first time I experienced the true sacredness of life. One day I was alone hunting when a sea lion came by, and I shot it. I knew the instant of its death, not because I was so sure of my shot, but because of what happened next. In an instant, an extremely subtle electrical impulse rushed through my body. I experienced the spirit of this animal. In the instant that the life-force came through my body, this sea lion told me it had consciousness and intelligence, and it was surrendering itself to me. That changed the way I looked at all life on this planet. In an instant, my reverence and regard for all life expanded exponentially.

Later, I told my *Aachaa* what I had experienced. He smiled, looked me deep in the eyes, and said, "*Exumnuxkoh.*" Good. That was all he said. In that single word, he affirmed my experience, told me it was shared, and rejoiced with me in the knowing of it.

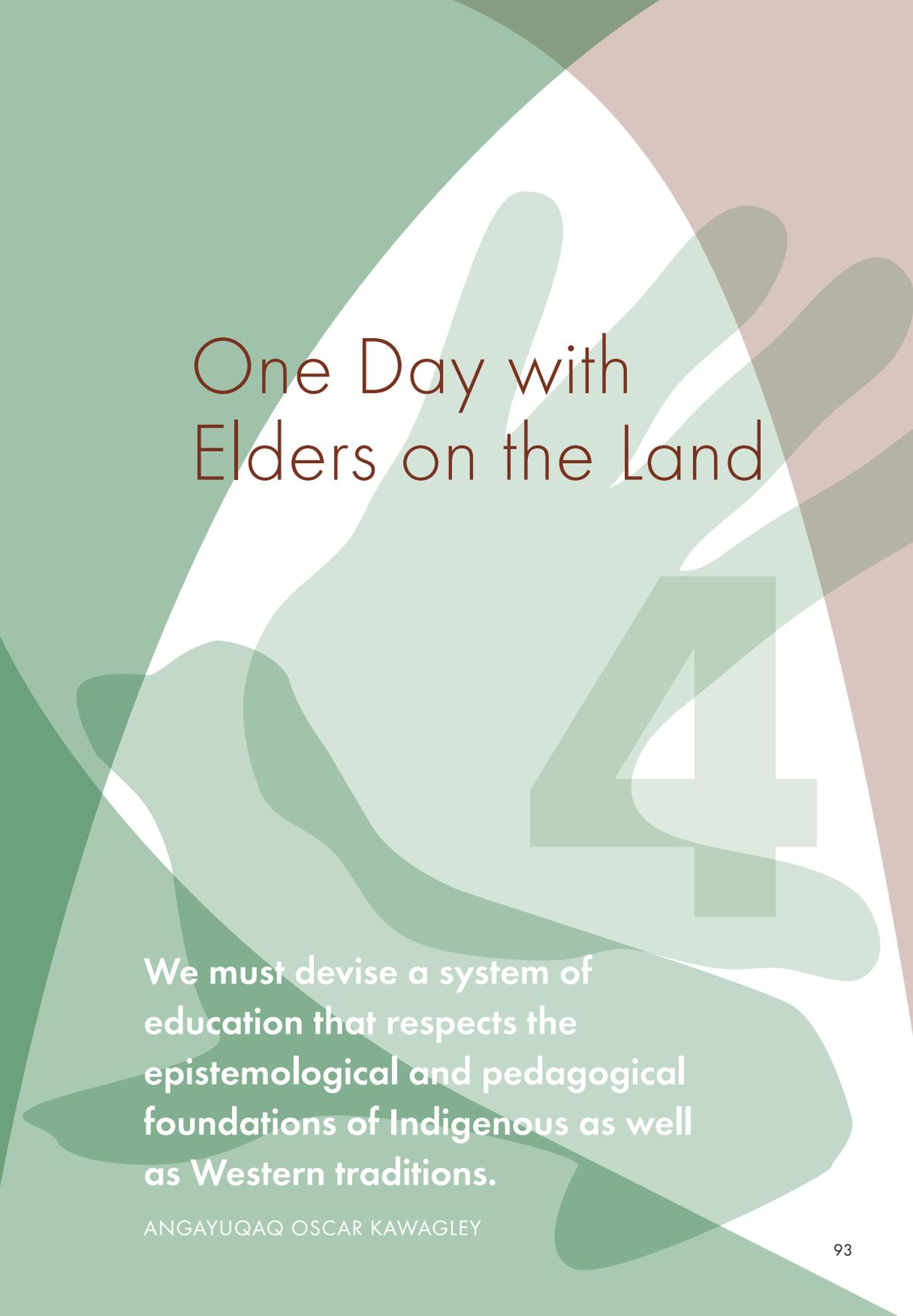
For the first deep time, I knew the reverence my people had for any animal they took. In experiencing the profoundness of this sea lion's death, I came into connection with the Divine and experienced the oneness of all Creation. When I killed that sea lion, I experienced our connection at the deepest level. We are not separate beings, he and I. We are one.

This is what we mean by a sacred experience. It's not religion; it's a way of being that is connected to self, others, and all of existence in a deep, profound, and spiritual way. It is connection that guides, directs, and informs us of our proper relationship with self, others, and the earth. This is what we call the way of the real human being.



## **Reflection**

How do you experience the interconnectedness of the world?

The background features abstract, overlapping shapes in shades of green and brown. A large, semi-transparent number '4' is positioned on the right side of the page. The text is centered in the upper half of the page.

# One Day with Elders on the Land

We must devise a system of education that respects the epistemological and pedagogical foundations of Indigenous as well as Western traditions.

ANGAYUQAQ OSCAR KAWAGLEY