

The background features abstract, overlapping shapes in shades of green and red. A large, semi-transparent number '4' is positioned in the lower right quadrant. 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

# Contents

<b>Day Four</b> .....	95
<b>Interacting with Elders</b> .....	97
<b>A Gathering of Elders</b> Elaine Abraham, Leonard Apangalook, Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley, Howard Luke, and Alberta Stephan.....	99
<b>On the Land</b> .....	116
<b>On the Elders' Words</b> Ilarion Mercurieff.....	117

# FACULTY INTENSIVE

## Day Four

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In the best of all possible worlds we would have held the entire learning experience outdoors, on the land and on the waters. We would have caught and cooked some fish together, or else filleted it and hung it up to dry. We would have gathered berries or seaweed or medicinal herbs, all the while observing and learning from the Elders about the proper protocols for harvesting, preparation, and use. We would have learned ceremonies for giving thanks and for ensuring that the animals and plants we harvested would be sustained and continue to thrive. We would have danced and told stories and laughed.

In this world, the best we could manage was a single day on tribal lands with modified versions of dancing, storytelling, feasting, and listening to Elders. And even that was a close call. Because this was to be a university-sponsored event, we had to meet one set of rules. As guests on tribal lands, we had to observe a different set of rules. We'd need an invitation from tribal officials, a waiver from university catering in order to serve Native foods, and permission from Wells Fargo

### Sample Agenda

Protocols for Interacting with Elders

Transportation to Eklutna

Learning from Elders

Lunch: Alaska Native Foods

Stories Without Words

Drumming and Dancing

Bank to access the picnic grounds (it's a long story). Throw in Anchorage weather in early May (cold, with a muddy remnant of winter snow still on the ground), a couple of people who needed help in moving around, and the protocols of a United Nations summit meeting, and you are starting to get the picture.

It had been especially tricky to invite the Elders. We wanted to include Elders from a diversity of cultures with strong ties to traditional subsistence practices and pedagogies who were comfortable walking in both traditional Native and academic worlds. Many we might have included either live far from Anchorage, speak little or no English, or both. We needed Elders who were healthy enough

to spend a whole day with us, available within our timeframe, and close enough to Anchorage that we wouldn't have to fly them in. It wasn't always easy to track them down, and we continued to feel a certain amount of anxiety about who would actually be there right up to the last minute.

"I was at fish camp and seal camp out near Yakutat," laughed Elaine Abraham. "My son got us seven huge seals, and it's a job to do that, so we had school kids there to help us with it. I went from there to halibut and king salmon camp. I'm always happy when the phones are out. I just got back two days ago, and I thank Larry and Libby for their patience with me."

We wanted to offer traditional foods in recognition of the central role that harvesting, preparation, storage, and consumption of wild foods plays in traditional Alaska Native cultures. An enormous amount of their teaching—including their philosophy, history, psychology, anthropology, biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, and more—takes place as part of hunting, fishing, gathering, cooking, skinning, filleting, smoking, and drying foods or preparing to do these things. We were honored when Tina Woods, adjunct faculty member and gifted chef of Aleut ancestry, agreed to provide and prepare an array of salmon, halibut, fry bread, and berries for our lunch. We ate out of doors, on the big sweep of mountain-ringed lands that constitute the Eklutna picnic grounds.

Eklutna is the tribal center for the Dena'ina nation that once exercised traditional and customary use of the lands now occupied by the Municipality of Anchorage. We met in the tiny community center, a rustic log-cabin-style structure whose walls are ornamented with drawings and maps. We sat packed together in about three hundred square feet of floor space: sixteen faculty members, five Elders, two facilitators, a tribal staff member, an administrative assistant, and a video cameraman. The faculty group sat in folding chairs along one side of the darkened room; the Elders gathered around a small table along the other side. The staff member had set up a slide show along one wall. The cameraman was stuffed into a back corner, in a space barely big enough to turn around. It was quite a difference from the well-lit and OSHA-approved campus classrooms most of us were used to.

The Elders held forth for the rest of the morning, while the rest of us watched and listened in silence and respect.



## Learning from Elders

*A few ideas for bringing the wisdom of Elders into your classroom.*

Identify indigenous Elders in your region who might offer different views of your topic from those offered by experts from the dominant culture. Respectfully offer them the opportunity to share their perspectives. Compensate them appropriately.

Consider what role Elders (indigenous or not) might play in helping your students achieve greater perspective in your discipline. Would it make sense to invite people with fifty or more years of experience in your field to tell stories or offer guidance to younger people? Might your students be asked to interview people like that and report their findings to the class?

## PROTOCOLS

# Interacting with Elders

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We met in the library that morning for some last protocol reminders. Everyone was dressed warmly in anticipation of spending part of the day outdoors.

Ilarion reviewed certain key protocols for interacting with and learning from our guest Elders, concepts deep within Native-style communication:

- Always treat Elders with deference and respect.
- Pay attention to their needs. For example, get water for them to prevent dehydration. If it looks like they need your help, provide it without being asked. (Native peoples usually have a younger escort assigned to an Elder to attend to those needs).
- If you ask a direct question, make sure it is a thoughtful one. Elders are very tolerant, but they gauge the level of maturity of the listener by the quality of the question, and meet you at that level. So if you ask a question that you could have figured out for yourself by listening and observing, they will note that.
- Instead of asking a direct question, try engaging in a conversation about the topic. That way, you might get to know more about the context of the subject or issue. You might hear a story about it and get a sense of the deeper meaning of it.
- Listen and observe more than you talk. Small talk is less important to most Alaska Native Elders (and peoples) than relationship. Connecting with someone just by being with them and listening to a story together feeds people more than talking with one another.
- Be aware that seemingly unrelated stories often have multiple layers of meaning about relationships. “I was with Sadie yesterday. We had caribou stew. It was really good. She told us a story.” This kind of sharing may seem to have no direct connection to the topic at hand; it is offered as a way of enriching relationships.
- Native conversation is nuanced and indirect. If an Elder wants to invite you to do something, they will not ask you directly. They might say, “I’m having salmon today.” This could be an invitation to join them for dinner.
- Much communication occurs non-verbally. For example, many Native peoples (including students in classes), will answer “Yes” to a question simply by raising their eyebrows. Similarly, when people meet each other, they may not say a word, but raised eyebrows or looking each other directly in the eyes will signal acknowledgement of one another and the fact that everything is OK. An Elder looking sideways at you, however, indicates that something needs to be corrected!



From left; Leonard Apangalook, Howard Luke, Ben Snowball (drummer), Oscar Kawagley, and Elaine Abraham.

**Elaine Abraham** is Tlingit from the Raven moiety clan of the Copper River in Yakutat. Her father was a traditional Tlingit chief, and she was raised in the traditional Tlingit manner. She attended the first accredited nursing program for Native American women and returned to Alaska as the first Tlingit registered nurse. She served as Yakutat School Board President during the desegregation of the village school; organized the Southeast Native Board of Health; held several administrative positions at Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka; developed the Tlingit and Haida Language Teachers Training program; and helped create the Alaska Native Language Center. At UAA she served as Vice President for Rural Education Affairs, Coordinator of Native Student Services, and Associate Professor. She holds a Master of Arts in Teaching from Alaska Pacific University and is Chair of the Board for the Alaska Native Science Commission.

**Leonard Piitqaak Apangalook, Sr.** was a Siberian Yup'ik leader, master boat-builder, and whaling captain from the village of Gambell on St. Lawrence Island. He served as a magistrate for the region and in many other positions of leadership with his people and elsewhere. His observations of changes in Arctic sea ice are included in "Sea Ice Knowledge and Use," part of an International Polar Year project. He died in 2012.

**Howard Luke** is an Athabascan Elder who was born at Linder Lake, Alaska, in 1923. His mother would teach him at night with stories and *gaalee'ya* which means "how to take care of your luck." Howard's family moved to Fairbanks in 1937. Howard established the Gaalee'ya Spirit Camp, which offers Alaska Native youth a chance to learn subsistence and other Native cultural practices and skills. He published an autobiography, *Howard Luke: My Own Trail*, edited by Jan Steinbright Jackson. As a culture bearer, he is respected for his wisdom and knowledge of Athabascan culture, language, and lands.

**Alberta Stephan**, an Upper Inlet Dena'ina Elder, was born on the outskirts of the tent city of Anchorage. Her grandfather was Chief Ezi from the Matanuska/Eklutna area. She grew up with her family along upper Cook Inlet, following a subsistence way of life. She is the acknowledged matriarch of the Eklutna Village and author of *Traditional Athabascan Fish Recipes*, *The First Athabascans of Alaska*, and *Cheda*.

# A Gathering of Elders

*We were honored to be in the presence of five distinguished Elders for the day. The following is based on a transcription of their actual words as they addressed the faculty participants and each other during the morning's gathering.*

## Welcome: Alberta Stephan

*As a representative of the Eklutna tribe, Alberta Stephan welcomed her fellow Elders and saluted the historic nature of the gathering. Eklutna Village was honored, she told them, to be hosting a gathering of four Alaska Native nations on their lands. Then, with classic self-deprecating Native humor, she got right down to business.*

I didn't know when they invited me that I was going to be talking to all teachers, people affiliated with the school. So I wrote down a bunch of gripes, because I thought we were going to talk to a bunch of politicians...

*There was loud laughter all around. Alberta then spoke for quite some time, starting with a history of the Eklutna people and her own family, and moving on to comment on the education of Alaska Native children based upon that history.*

I was born at Whitney, Alaska. That's a little section outside of Anchorage. I was born in a tent. My father worked on the railroad. He and my mom had their first home here in Eklutna Village. My mom was born in Knik Village, and she was in the orphanage when it was moved to Eklutna from Tyonek. The orphanage then became Eklutna Vocational School where they taught gardening, building, cooking, clerical work, and first aid. The school was there until 1925.

I started school when I was seven, and my mom and her half-brother helped me with the first and second year of school. My mom taught her in-laws ABC's and some reading, the ones that were too old for school. The Natives in my dad's generation did not get a chance to go to school, so they lived their own ways, until the hunting and the fishing laws came out and they could no longer hunt and fish or trap like they used to. My dad was deaf and there were no doctors around in those days. He did labor work on the railroad for a while until it became too dangerous for him to work. That generation, my dad's generation, took to alcohol and could no longer teach their children how to make their living off the lands. The young people that were lucky enough to go to school had a hard time with book learning. Now about four generations of children later, those same children are considered mentally retarded. No one to teach them anything they needed to know.

Children must start learning from the time they start noticing things; it doesn't matter how young. Their brains need to be developed. I know some people that couldn't even grasp ABC's. And the parents were no longer able to teach them how to live in Native ways, so they had a hard time. And when children are in boarding schools and children's homes, the only thing they learn is what they do right there: washing dishes, keep their clothes clean and their rooms clean. No

money management, no freedom to use their own brains, nobody to tell them if they're doing a good job or not, and there you have children that are having a hard time all the way through.

One time when I was about nine years old, my dad was a commercial fisherman, and he took me into the office at the cannery. And there was this lady sitting there, typing away like mad. And he asked me, "Do you think you can do that someday?"

No way.

*She waved her hands in front of her body, back and forth.*

I'm a Native, you know, and I didn't know the difference, I just couldn't... I knew there were white people, they were doing their thing. I couldn't grasp the idea that I would someday learn how to do that, you know? "No," I said. "No."

But later on my brother had polio, and he was in and out of orthopedic hospitals where he got his education. He took business courses in there, and he told me it's not all that hard to learn to type. He had an old typewriter that my mom got from a Sears catalog, and so he gave it to me, and he showed me how. Much later, President Johnson had this anti-poverty plan, and I went to this program and learned to type, learned office procedures and stuff like that.

But what I'm saying is that when the children think they can't do it, they have to be told they can do it. And they have to be confident in it. Children need encouragement.

Native people had a hard time adjusting to a new way of life. Some of them made it real fine; some of them did not. And the ones that did not are usually the ones out on the street. And they can't go back home and do what they used to do because there's too many laws now. So that in a nutshell is how I will explain the Native people and their lack of education. They haven't had a chance to do all that, you know...

I have watched the children growing up around our village. I also study our people and our progress. There is a chain reaction of not teaching what the children should know. The parents' grandparents were raised the Native way and most of them don't have the knowledge to pass on. I have given many talks on our historical Native ways. Schools won't teach the children everything.



## Apology: Ilarion Merculieff

*After the initial welcome and introduction, an important item was added to the morning's agenda: an apology to the Eklutna people. It turns out we had made two significant errors in protocol in setting up the gathering, and Ilarion moved to repair any relational damage that might have resulted. He stood up and faced Alberta with two feathers in his hand, the darker one nestled into a small leather pouch. He held up the white one first.*

Before we begin I wanted to offer this to you, Alberta, as a gift to thank and honor the people of Eklutna on this land.

*He held up the second, a dark brown.*

The other one is an apology. This is a learning moment for everybody. These feathers came from the island where the Aleut people made their last stand against the Russians. The Russians decided in the 1700's they were going to wipe out all the people on the three largest islands in the Aleutians. After that attack, the three thousand survivors—mostly elderly people, babies, and children—went to this one island. And the Russians found out about it and decided to kill all of them. They killed 3,000 people in four hours. I was the first Aleut to go back to that island since that happened. It was quite an experience, as you can imagine.

When I was on the island, I was praying and asking for any messages from the ancestors. The message that came back was, "We are still here on this island waiting for the time when people will heal. When our people heal, then we are ready to go." And I looked over to one side and there were these feathers. So this white one is symbolic of the healing that we are going through and the hope that we have.

This other one..., well, I teach about protocol to outside people all the time, so I should know these things. But there are some things I am trying to correct in terms of the protocol of coming here. We invited the Kicaput Singers and Dancers, but they are from another tribe, and we failed to ask specific permission for them to dance on this land. The other omission was forgetting to invite the head of the tribe to join us and say something if she wished. Those are big omissions on my part. I called the tribal leader and apologized, and she graciously accepted the apology. But I felt like more was needed.

And so I offer this feather and the fur seal teeth in this pouch to the people of Eklutna with my deepest apologies for missing that point.

*He crossed the small room in two slow steps and reached across the table to hand the feathers to Alberta, who stood to receive them. Alberta said, "This is a great moment where we have all cultures together, and we're doing something with a common goal. And I think this is really a historic day for the Native Village of Eklutna. Thank you all for coming."*

## **Introductions: Ilarion Merculieff**

*As Alberta sat down, Ilarion spoke again. He welcomed the Elders and confirmed the fact that this gathering was a first of its kind on these lands. Then, one by one, he introduced the Elders at the table.*

Over here we have Elaine Abraham. I've known her for a few years. Such a beautiful heart. Every time I hear your voice my heart warms up.

*His voice lifted, and he raised open hands in front of his heart.*

She is from Yakutat and Anchorage; she used to work at the University of Alaska, and we have depended on her to give us guidance on a lot of things, one of which was the Alaska Native Science Commission, where she served on the Advisory Board.

And then of course you've all met Dr. Oscar Kawagley, Angayuqaq... He's been the go-between to connect up the outside world ...to try to help them understand the Yup'ik worldview and has been invaluable in that. And everywhere I go they say, "Oh yeah, yeah, I've read Dr. Kawagley's book." It makes my job a lot easier.

And here is Leonard Apangalook. He's from St. Lawrence Island and is a former whaling captain. Now it's no easy thing to be a whaling captain. You have to know so much, and you have to be really on the top of your game, as they say today. He was good enough to agree to be with us, and I'm very glad to have you.

*He reached across the table and picked up the ball cap sitting in front of Howard Luke. The word SAVVY was spelled out in big bold letters across its front. Laughing, he picked it up and showed it around the room.*

And then Howard Luke. He and I have talked a lot about how people don't have common sense.

*Nearly everybody burst out laughing. He turned to the faculty participants.*

And I think I told you one time Howard and I were exchanging audio tapes, and in one of the tapes he said anybody who speaks in front of a group of people and has to read from a piece of paper has no business being up there! And I took that to heart.

*He turned back to Howard, gesturing to the faculty sitting against the wall.*

And I want you to know that we told them, nobody's going to write anything all week. No papers. Not even notes, just observe.

*Back to the faculty audience again.*

Howard has been a very honored Elder from the Interior. He has a spirit camp across the Yukon River, and he has been my guide in so many ways, as have all the Elders here... Howard's got an honorary doctorate, and his camp has helped a lot of young people up there.

*And back to Howard one last time.*

We are very glad to have you here.

## **Maria Coleman: A Brief History of Eklutna**

*Tribal Council and staff member Maria Coleman gave a presentation that provided some historical and cultural context for our time on Eklutna lands.*

Anthropologists like to call us Athabascan or Tenaina; we call ourselves Dena'ina and more specifically Upper Inlet Dena'ina.

*She showed a picture of the Eklutna Village logo, a drawing of the valley with its two distinctive mounds.*

Eklutna means two hills or two knobs...It's the anglicized version of *Id'loi'nu* or *Idlughet*, which means the river that flows between two knobs. I love to hear the Elders tell the stories. They say that essentially the mounds were created by a giant whale that left the big lake because her offspring had been teased. Our storytellers estimate that this event occurred at the time of glacier melt.

*She showed maps of Cook Inlet and Knik Arm dotted with traditional fishing and camping sites. The map of abandoned settlements had more than twenty markers; the map of presently occupied sites had only four.*

The people used to rest here at Eklutna as they moved between their summer fish camps along Knik Arm and their winter homes in the Copper Center area. Our families had tent frames and cabins in regularly used places. Alberta's ancestors had a fish camp on what is now called Point Woronzof. \* They used to dig pits and cover food with birch bark to keep it cool. Our Elders say birch bark is a natural preservative.

*The next slide was titled "Exodus;" it listed ten events cascading from the arrival of Russians in the 1700s. Among them were a smallpox epidemic that wiped out half the Dena'ina population in 1838 and the founding of the Alaska Railroad in 1915, at which time Dena'ina land was "basically sold out from under us" as lots to form the city of Anchorage.*

That brought a whole lot of outsiders to Alaska. Everybody left again during World War I, but then there were lots of jobs for Dena'ina people. So we were very successful for a short time. But then in 1918 we lost half our population for a second time to another outbreak of influenza.

• Today a public recreational site within the Municipality of Anchorage.

*Then came the boarding school era, a mixed period when some Native individuals got a useful education while others had extremely negative experiences. Alberta joined her voice to this discussion. "The Eklutna school was formerly the Tyonek orphanage," she said. "It was moved over here in 1922 or '23. The men in the village helped put the dormitories up, and then they were encouraged to marry the girls as soon as they were sixteen. And so a lot of the girls didn't finish their education. They went as far as maybe eighth grade. And most of the men in the village didn't go to the school at all; they just learned what they could from their wives."*

*Alberta also called out the school superintendent of the time for listing people as Aleuts instead of Dena'ina, encouraging students to marry young, and transferring tribal lands to non-Native interests. "They had a fishing site down by the river, they had farmland, they had chickens, they had a little infirmary where they taught the girls nursing and taking care of sick people. So it was an OK school where kids got a start."*

*Turning back to the Exodus slide, Maria pointed to the last four points on the list.*

*In 1939, they closed down commercial fishing in Cook Inlet, at which our people were very successful. So we lost that. There was a cannery at Ship Creek. A lot of our Elders talk about that; they were treated very well there, and most of their business was from the Dena'ina people. There was World War II. Next the 1959 Statehood Act affected us, because in order for non-Natives to achieve statehood, they had to basically promise to fix their relationships with Alaska Natives. And then the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, where we got ten percent of Alaska back as owners and shareholders where we'd had a hundred percent of the land before.*

*The penultimate slide presented a list of views and values that by now were becoming familiar to nearly all of us in the room. It will be time when it is time. All we really have is today. No one is above or below. Ties are never severed. Listen to your Elders. Talk from your heart. Be thankful. Be quiet. Share.*

*The last slide featured a photo of Maria and her mother, Elizabeth (Ezi) Mills, under the heading "Chin'an. There are no goodbyes."*

## Elaine Abraham

*Ilarion then invited the other Elders to share whatever they might want to share, beginning with Elaine.*

Talking about protocol, I have to go through a protocol first because this is the way of life of our Native people. I want to thank Alberta and the spirits and the ancestors who are on this land. I want to honor the spirits that were the ancestors of Alberta and Maria, that we are welcomed to this land. And I want to thank Libby and Larry for trying to keep up with me where I was two days ago... I'm especially happy to have my niece with me here.

*She continued around the room, acknowledging the faculty participants, the other Elders, and the Eklutna tribal members who were present. By the time she made it around the room, everyone present had been seen, acknowledged, and honored.*

I especially wanted to honor Alberta... because she's written so many books. Developing books is really good for our young people because now they read and that's what they relate to.

My people have so many ways in common with the ways they have here [at Eklutna]. We are trying to get our young people away from TVs and radios and iPods long enough to get them to fish camp and to seal camp for two weeks every year, so they can learn how to start from scratch: where to get the boat ready, get the oars ready, boys' jobs, girls' jobs. We're trying to get back to the way it used to be when we grew up, when Alberta and Oscar grew up, the way it was.

When we get up in the morning we pray that that day is a special day. We don't know what the night will bring, and we don't know what tomorrow will bring, so every day is a sacred day. It's a sacred life; it's a sacred way of life.

The Tlingits believe that every word you speak has a spirit to it. My father used to say because I was so active, I had to be quiet. I had to listen and not speak words just as they came to me. Because every word had a spirit, and it would fly like a butterfly, and it landed on a person in either a negative way or a positive way or in a blessing.

So I really am glad to be here. I've learned a lot from Alberta, and from the slide show and the commonality of the way our life was and the way it is today. Where we're still fighting for each of our lands, the sacred land of our ancestors. This common bond is so important. I'm glad we are together today, from St. Lawrence Island to up north where Howard comes from, to the Kuskokwim where Oscar comes from, and we are grateful for the land of your ancestors, Alberta.

*Gunalchéesh.* Thank you.

## Alberta Stephan

*Alberta held up a copy of one of her books, The First Athabascans of Alaska.*

I wrote about the people and how they lived before contact. They never thought they were having a hard time because this was their way of life. I lived some of it myself. Every year we had to go to fish camp and then up to the mountains for hunting. My dad was trapping a lot after he couldn't work anymore, and I always missed about two months of school, the first month and the last month, because we would have to go someplace where he would do some trapping.

I grew up in a time when there was no Salvation Army, no garage sales or anything like that. My mother would take an old man's trousers to make me clothes to wear. It was good that she had been in the schools. She learned how to use a sewing machine and a little bit about medicine, so she was able to take care of everybody real good that way.

I know a little bit about the culture before contact, so that's why I wrote that book. My grandmother and I were very close. Any time my mom had to go out wood cutting or taking showers or something, I was home with her. And I learned a lot from her, and I learned her determination. There was a thing she always said: "Who said it was hard?"

She was from the Copper Center area, born in 1875. Her father's the one that had the fish camp out by Point Woronzof. They used to walk from Copper Center down by the Matanuska River every spring after their fish. They had to know exactly how much to take to last them all winter. And they could count by ten, and that many fish made a bundle, and they knew how many bundles they needed. So they got enough fish, and then they walked all the way back up [to the Copper Center area] again.<sup>5</sup>

She met my grandfather when she was eighteen and he was riding one of those little steam engine boats, delivering supplies from the larger ships that couldn't come up to the beaches. He delivered supplies to the trading posts at Sunrise and Tyonek. After they got married, they took over the fish camp at Point Woronzof. Later on my dad and his two brothers inherited it, so that's a very old historical place for us. There's a graveyard back there that's in the historical records out at Point Woronzof where some of my relatives are buried.

I wrote her story because she had such a hard time. She had to go through the changes, to the point where they couldn't go out and get any kind of game or anything just to eat. They lived on rabbits; rabbits were always plentiful. If you want to know more about my grandmother, you have to read the book!

*She held up two other books she had written.*

I also wrote a book about the way we dry our fish. Even my own kids didn't know that. And this is a Dena'ina language book. Marc helped me put it together, and it has a CD in the back where you can hear my voice."

<sup>5</sup> According to Google Maps, a distance of 201 miles using today's road system.

*Marc Lamoreaux, Director of the Land and Environment Department of the Native Village of Eklutna, joined Alberta for the discussion. He gave a brief explanation of efforts to get Eklutna lands back from non-Native interests who acquired them without Dena'ina permission during the early twentieth century. Although several groups have offered to help, the money involved is prohibitive. "The price the bank wants for the land we're going to be on? Three million dollars. It's land that used to be completely owned, used, and occupied by the people who live in this area. It was taken totally without our permission and now we're put into the position of having to buy back what was stolen from us."*

*There were audible exhalations and a couple of groans at this point as audience members expressed their sympathy. There was a grim silence before Alberta spoke again. She told us about something that happened during World War II when a tribal leader gave the railroad or the Corps of Engineers permission to extract rock from a knob of mountain considered sacred by the Eklutna people. The rock was used for highways and bridges. The fallout from the dynamite used to blast the rock free, she believes, may have been responsible for a rash of respiratory illnesses, a few cases of lupus, and even the epidemic of early deaths suffered by men from the village.*

When the war broke out...there was no army here, no highways, no nothin'. Alaska was the first one the Japanese invaded. And everyone was in a great big hurry. My dad died when he was 64. What I would like to know really is [what was in] the dynamite that they were using?

*She also mentioned the possible fallout from military target practice and how it may have affected subsistence foods eaten by villagers.*

In target practicing, the powder flies all over the place. That's what the birds were eating...this doesn't happen only around here in Eklutna Village, I think it's probably happened all over.

*There was silence. Ilarion cleared his throat and said "Even the modern day history is still affected by the oppressive things that were done in the past and that are still being continued. Thank you Alberta for sharing that."*

## Howard Luke

*He turned to Howard on his right. "Maybe I could ask you Howard if you want to share anything?"*

*Howard spoke slowly, his voice raspy and ragged. He spoke first to the history of miscommunication between Alaska Native and non-Native people, and how those miscommunications can sometimes result in significant conflicts with respect to the use of resources in an area. Because of the lack of understanding, Native peoples sometimes "say yes to what we don't even understand."*

Yeah. I learned quite a bit from working with older people. And our chief, you know, he's the one that I learned a lot from. You know the first president who came to Alaska? You know who that was? President Harding. So he came to Nenana, and everybody from all over came to Nenana to listen to the president talk. They all sat on the ground, and our chief, Chief Thomas, sat up there on back of the rail car. So [the President would] talk and talk and talk. Nobody couldn't understand him, you know? Finally he said to the chief, "Well you talk, talk to the people." So Chief Thomas got up there and started talking, talking, talking in our Native tongue. Finally he quit talking, and he turned around, and he told the president, "Did you understand what I was saying?" And the president said, "Not a word." He said, "Neither did I; when you were talking I couldn't understand you."

The chief said, "When you said mineral, why didn't you say sand and gravel?" That's the reason right now that we're not getting along. And right now young people could explain to us what non-Native leaders might be saying because I do not understand them. I don't understand what they're talking about. It'll take me a little while to find out what they're talking about. So the president, he went over there and he thanked the chief for saying that. And right now, that's the reason we're falling back because we say yes to what we don't even understand.

But today I know what they're talking about... They're using our land so fast right now it's terrible, and that's what I'm doing right now, I'm trying to share, I don't do that for money. I just volunteer, and I go to the schools and I just volunteer to let the young people know what's ahead. We've got to look for the future. See what's happening right now? See the price of the groceries...

*He grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and spoke about its cost.*

Seventy dollars. In my young days, we'd pay six dollars for better quality. And that's what I mean, you know? Depression is coming. And they said that years ago, our leaders said that depression's going to come, and it's going to affect the whole world. And I seen depression when I was a kid, and... we have to let our young people know about these things. And pass these things on, you know? And if it gets too far, you know, we probably can't get out of it.

*Howard turned his attention to the effects of the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA). As parties to this landmark 1971 legislation, Alaska's Native peoples relinquished aboriginal claims to virtually all inhabitable lands in Alaska in exchange for forty four million acres to be divided among Native villages and regions throughout the state. Twelve regional and over 200 village corporations—entirely new structures in Native life—were established to select the lands, hold the*



*titles, and administer the settlement payments on behalf of their shareholders (also a completely new concept). ANCSA was—and for many still remains—contentious.*

Some leaders at the time said we gotta vote for the land claim. But my mother said that if the land claim went through that families would end up fighting over the land, and they are doing that now. Before he passed, Chief Thomas knew something like the land claim was coming. The Elders back then, they knew what was coming up, and they warned us not to go for it. “Otherwise,” they said, “you are going to lose your livelihood.”

And see what is happening right now? Like my mother was saying, they stole our land. They stole our land. Not only here; it’s all over. The corporation leaders are doing that today. There’s nothing left for the younger generation in Doyon.\*\* They’re not thinking about the younger generation. My heart goes out for the young people. I don’t care about myself, me, but I want the young people to know these things.

*And then to the loss of self-sufficiency brought about by adopting Western ways.*

I don’t think much about that computer. It’s taking our livelihood away. If you want to figure out something, you do it yourself. The computer is doing it for you, and you are uncomfortable, you are in conflict, but if you do it yourself, by our [way], you will feel good about yourself, proud of yourself. You did it.

It’s terribly hard for the young people right now. They can’t even do something if the light goes out. What are you gonna do? Can’t get your money out of the bank, nothin’. And that’s what I’m saying right now. We have to step forward and think about these things before it gets too far. But I write a letter all the time, to the editors and stuff. I wrote a letter to the governor. I wrote a letter to the president. I got a call from the governor a couple of weeks ago, and they’re going to come down to my camp and explain to them what I’m talking about. Like I say, you know, depression comes. It’s going to be hard on the young people who wouldn’t know what to do, how to survive, what are they going to do..

Trees are our livelihood. The pitch, if you get infected...”

*He drew a line across his chin with a finger.*

I got a sore when I was really young, they cut it wide open, and my mother got pitch and put the pitch on there, and right now there’s not even a mark. See all those things? All those things on the ground, it’s all the life. That’s what I mean. We gotta respect it. And we’re not doing it. We’re not respecting. No conscious, no nothing. And that’s what I’m trying to do right now is to bring that back. I think about that when I’m home alone. There used to be a bigger village where my camp is, and all the people passed away, moved out of there. Now I’m the only one that’s there now.

\* See *Alaska Native Cultures and Issues* for more information.

\*\*The Native regional corporation for Interior Alaska.

*He shared some of the lessons he learned from his mother about survival and self-sufficiency in hard times.*

Be on time. When you say you're going to be there, be there. That's life and death. My mother was my coach for everything. We lost my dad when I was really young, so my mother was the one that taught me these things. Be on time, because that's life and death, you know. Maybe if you don't show up and it's 50 below weather.... And that's what I mean, tell the young people always be on time. How to survive. ...You only drink water. You eat that top snow, it's just like a little baby, it will go through your body, and you'll just get weak. You take that top one off, you take the bottom part that has all the nourishment. All those things, I want to leave behind. If you get stuck out in the country out there...dig a hole and use the moss for your bedding, I teach them. They come out every winter when it's 30 below, they come out and spend the night. I showed them how to do it, in case they get stuck, you know.

*He expressed his deep concern that modern humans "got no conscious" and are disrespecting the earth and its gifts.*

Like all our earth, we don't take care of it. When we're drinking water, we just drink half of it and we throw it out, throw it out, and that's no respect. And that's a problem we're having right now, all the problem people having outside? All that fire and tornado and all that stuff, we never used to have that. And look at them guys going out to the moon. And the creator right now is mad because we're not listening. That's what's happening right now. I don't go to church or nothing, but I strongly revere in my heart. I have a church right here in my home, right here in my home. Every night and every morning I pray for the young people to have faith in our Elders and for more Elders to share with the young people. It's getting down right now that we have to look for their future...

Look at our game. They open the season on cows. Back home, when the cows are just going to have calves, they killed three moose at one shot. And you know, that's murder. That's murder. That's no respect. They got no conscious, nothing. I bet if you cut their hand, they wouldn't even know. That's what I mean, conscious. And I'm not going to give up, I'm going to continue doing this because I...my mother always told me, no matter who they are, black or white or yellow, you sit down and share with them. When you are sharing with them, you're bringing yourself up, you're making yourself more stronger.

And I tell you, if it wasn't for white man right now I wouldn't be walking. Sometimes the white man comes in handy, you know?

*We laughed.*

I never got no schooling. I quit school when I was in the second grade because there was depression then, and my mother was all alone and raised me. So I quit school. And right today I feel good about it because I learn as I go, as I go on my journey. I learn how to read and write and stuff like that cause I taught myself. You can do anything you want to do if you put your

heart to it. Because time is getting short. Like I say, you know, sometimes I say, white man comes in handy sometimes.

*He chuckled, leaned forward, and made eye contact across the table.*

Is that right?

*We laughed again, and then Ilarion spoke movingly of his friend, collaborator, and Elder. "Howard has been in such a strong connection to the land where he comes from. I remember he used to make these beautiful dog sleds, and one time I asked, 'How you get the runners to curve like that? Do you steam it?' He said, 'No. I talk to the trees, and they tell me.' That's not a romanticized notion. We are lucky to still have Elders who understand this way of communication. And these Elders around the world, they talk about the big changes that are happening now, and they're mostly concerned, just like Howard is, about the young people not being ready. They've lost the understanding of how to connect in this way, how to learn what it is we need to learn, to listen to the Elders that are passing along this wisdom we are going to need to survive the times that are coming and which are going to be soon."*

*Howard responded.*

That's the reason I say, no matter who they are, you share with them, you're helping yourself... And, like I say, you can do anything you want to do if you put your heart to it. You want to do something? You do it now. Because maybe tomorrow won't be there. So that's what I want to leave with the young people. I want the young people to take that step because there ain't going to be nothing left later on.

And to share with one another...if you don't know how to do it, maybe your friend will know how to do these things. Like I say, there's always a way. Never get excited. Take your time at doing this. Heal yourself. One time I was out muskrat hunting and my finger got infected and a mark went up my arm. And I was alone. So I thought about it, I thought about it, and I got that pitch out there and I put that thing on there, and next morning the stitch just came right out, just pulled it right out. If I didn't have that thing right out I probably wouldn't be here right today.

But those are the things that I wanted to leave with the young people. If I wait until tomorrow to tell you, maybe tomorrow won't come. So I thank you very much for your beautiful paying attention. Carry on, and share with one another. You share with one another, and you bring yourself up. Be proud of yourself, that you did it. So I thank you.

## Leonard Apangalook

*Next it was Leonard's turn to speak.*

I'm very pleased to be here; it's not very often that I get to address such a prestigious group of people, not to mention the honorable Elders here who preceded me with their statements, and I very much appreciated what they presented.

I think I should begin by briefly stating my background, so you have a better perspective of where I came from. I come from Gambell, Alaska, on St. Lawrence Island. That's the big island in the Bering Straits between Russia and Alaska. We sit right there in the middle of the Bering Straits. That's where I was born and raised. My location might differ a little bit from some of the regions represented here primarily because we were away from the mainland of Alaska. We were isolated on the island. But our contact with the whalers back in the mid-1800s or a little after that was when we started trading with the whalers, Boston whalers. So our contact was somewhat early with the outside world. But prior to that we were in contact with the Siberians. Gambell, by the way, is 38 miles from Siberia, almost 200 miles from the mainland of Alaska. And Gambell is the only place besides Little Diomedé where a person could look out the living room window...

*There was a lot of laughter at this. We knew where he was going.\**

...and see, uh, Russia. It's only thirty eight miles away. And that has some significance to it because our early contact was with the Siberians, the Russians. The anthropologists claim that we originated in Mongolia. You know, we bear the Mongolian spot, when our infants are born, there is a blue spot on the buttocks, which noted that we started from the Mongolians, and the immigration up across Siberia across the land bridge, into Alaska, eventually North America. But supposedly we're the same stock as the Chinese, Japanese, you know, the Asians.

Our recent ancestors in Alaska were so busy surviving the harsh elements that they really never had the time to develop the Toyotas and the Sonys. But we had the harpoon. We developed that, the early Eskimos did, and that's what we survived on. I always considered myself a hunter. Also, as Larry mentioned, I was a whaling captain. Before I was a magistrate, business manager, detachment commander, and special forces man, I was a hunter first.

I retained my traditional life style...very important...as I worked in my lifetime. Today it is necessary to live two lifestyles: the cash economy, which is a must today, and then the traditional lifestyle, our subsistence way of life. Up there in our region, where delivery costs are so high, you have to combine these two lifestyles to survive successfully. If you go subsistence lifestyle, that will be pretty tough at this time. And where we are, if you went total cash economy lifestyle, that takes away your tradition, your subsistence lifestyle. When we came here (my wife and I moved to Anchorage in October), we missed our food. It's something that is, uh, very hard. We do get

\* The line "I can see Russia from my house" still draws laughs from many Alaskans who remember the 2008 Vice Presidential campaign of Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin.

chicken, pork, and beef here in Anchorage, but we get hungry for our Native foods too. Because where we were, we would eat subsistence-gathered foods and then switch to pork, chicken, and beef for the following week, you know, things like that.

But I want to follow up a little bit on her remark earlier about education. I think I'm supposed to remark on Native ways of teaching or learning for our young people. I think teaching is very, very important. I wonder how many of you have read the book *The Kids from Nowhere*?<sup>\*</sup> These kids from nowhere are from my home town. I think there was only about five or six kids that were written about in that book. If you're an educator, I would recommend that you read this book because it's very interesting. To me, it denotes how a teacher can take these kids and succeed with them in their program, to where they went and took the international championship down there in Nebraska somewhere. These kids were in a problem-solving team in high school, and they had many topics that they studied. They competed in the district, and they took the district championship. They came to state, and they took the state championship. They ended up at the international meet where the best kids from New York to California, Puerto Rico, and Japan came and competed. And they took that too. And that was very significant because, as the book says, these kids were from nowhere. But a good teacher who was devoted took them all the way to the highest level. And we were very proud of that. These were our kids.

So that was something I wanted to mention also because we're concerned about the education of our young people. Right now, in our village we need people with degrees and things like that because under the Land Claims Settlement Act we need to develop our corporations and businesses. And we have found that without educated young people, local people, it's very hard to be successful in today's world.

So I guess I can say that we were victims of transition from the old lifestyle to the corporate world of today. And it's confusing. I've been through the process of trying to make it in the outside world. I succeeded to some extent without a degree. I went through Officer's Candidate School down in Fort Benning, Georgia, where I was a commissioned officer. I tried to go to college, but the money was not there, which made it very tough.

So like I said, we are victims of transition, and we're trying to cope with that situation. Part of us in the Native community are succeeding, but it's taken elements like the oil industry, you know, people bringing it in, coming in from the outside world. But that has to be controlled also because we still retain our traditional lifestyles. We still eat our Native foods [and practice] the old lifestyle of subsistence activity which is essential still today, despite the Congress. These two ways can conflict, but we have to make things work better.

I was a commissioner with the Alaska Eskimo Whaling Commission at one time, and we negotiated many provisions with the oil industry. We now have a conflict avoidance agreement with the industry and the whalers. These things, as far as I know, are working good for both sides, so we understand each other.

<sup>\*</sup> By George Guthridge, the true story of ten students from a 41-pupil high school in Gambell who, without access to computers or many books and with most speaking English as a second language, won two national team championships in academics in 1984, an achievement that's been called "one of the most stunning feats in the history of American education."

It gets pretty harsh out there at Gambell in the wintertime, and you have to haul your heating fuel and stuff like that. It gets pretty hard. [My wife Mildred and I] thought we'd move into Anchorage where most of our children live. We would move down here to Anchorage in the winter and then go back in the summer. We did come down finally, after I retired, also coupled with medical reasons. I'm undergoing dialysis right now.

## Oscar Kawagley

*Oscar was the last Elder to speak that morning.*

Since I've been in education for a great part of my life, I've always maintained to our Native young people that if they want to enter into the social sciences or into the physical sciences, they don't have to give up their Native-ness at all. They don't have to give up their language. They don't have to give up their culture. They become "experts" in their own particular world, because the white man and the white woman, eh, become expert at anything, we just get to know a lot. We never become experts.

*There was laughter around the table.*

Anyway, I always tell them that they can temper the Western sciences, because some [Western scientists] can be quite harsh and very disrespectful of whatever they study. I don't think they mean to be, but it's just the process of studying, all these things they have to do to animals.

I just mentioned to a class yesterday that I was in Rankin Inlet, and boy there was a very strong tension between the Western scientists and the Inuit. And one of the things that they were really questioning was these Fish and Game people going out and anesthetizing the animals, shooting chemicals into them to knock them out so they can take blood samples and other samples to take back to their laboratories. And the Inuit are saying, "What does that do to us, [who] consume those animals that have been given these chemicals whose effects we don't really know?"

That's the recent thing, eh? To anesthetize the animals to get all kind of samples. But those are the kinds of things that I think we as Native scientists would be able to approach in a very different way, in a way that is kinder to the animal and won't do any harm to the animals. Because our sciencing as a Native people is very gentle, and it's mainly observation. Not doing some of these harsh things that the scientists think they have to do.

And I always encourage people to teach their youngsters the Native language. This is of utmost importance, because spirituality, land, and the Native language, and climate change are very much related. And it's been shown by scientists (I'm thinking of several physicists who have worked with American Indians) that the Native languages were best able to describe and define the processes that were happening in the unseen world. English is very limited. And so it

behooves us as Native people to really spend our time studying our own Native languages. And I've told the class I'm so thankful my grandmother didn't permit me to go to boarding school because I grew up truly bilingual. When I got home, I spoke only my Native language; when I went to school, I spoke only in English. And that's probably the best thing that ever happened to me.

And before she even allowed me to go to school, into higher education, she finally consented. She had objected because her parents had not allowed her to go to school. The school opened in 1886 in Bethel. Her parents had said, "We are not allowing our daughter to go to school; she will become confused and stupid." And so I think she was doing the same thing to me, eh?

And she told me two things you have to remember: Never forget where you came from, and never forget your Native language. And I tried to keep those in mind no matter how rebellious I got and got to thinking that my Native language and my Native culture had no place in the world. You see, I suffered the trauma of trying to reject my own Native-ness. And now, like I said yesterday, I'm becoming more Native all the time."

*We laughed again, and then Alberta had the final word. "In our Athabaskan culture, and I'm pretty sure in every other culture, we're taught to respect the Elders very early. The children were either in another room or sitting still when the Elders ate or when they were sleeping. If a young boy killed a moose, or even a fish, the first parts, best parts are to go to the Elders. The Elders, we were told, had the experience, they had been there and they know what to do. If you have a problem, go to the Elders. They will help you solve it. In our lifestyle, the Elders always came first."*

*With these words, our time in the Community Center drew to a close. Libby stood, turned to the Elders and thanked them for sharing their wisdom. It was time now for lunch, time to get out on the land.*

## FACULTY INTENSIVE

# On the Land

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At last we went outside, onto the land, together. The picnic grounds were set into a spectacular open field encircled by stunning, snow-capped mountains. It was sunny and warm for a day in early May: over fifty degrees at least. We ate Tina's fish, mingled with the Elders, danced and told stories and laughed.

The Kicaput Singers and Dancers set up near a little stand of trees, performing traditional Yup'ik dances and inviting us to join in. A few of us did so, standing behind them and imitating their moves to the sounds of the drumbeat and singing. We were pretty bad, and that made us laugh.

Earlier in the week, as an optional activity, we had invited people to prepare a personal story from their own lives that they could share without using any words. This afternoon, the bravest among us gave it a try. One flapped her wings to show how she came to Alaska. Another danced to show how she'd met her husband in Polynesia. A third used his daughter's stuffed lions and tigers to demonstrate field research in Africa. They were all pretty funny, and we laughed some more.

There isn't really a lot more to say about this part of the day. For several hours, we just hung out together, moving, mingling, connecting with one another and with the natural world around us. This is hardly a typical faculty development experience, but it was probably the most important few hours of the whole week. We answered our own call to stop talking and went outside to just be together.

As Ilarion's grandfather might have said, the afternoon tasted good.





## REFLECTION

# On the Elders' Words

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As we put this book together, we wondered what some readers would make of this gathering of Elders. For a book called *Stop Talking*, the Elders talked for a really long time. They paid a lot of attention to protocol, and they referred to things in their personal histories that many readers won't understand. Opportunities to speak like this are rare, and they knew the occasion would be remembered, so they wanted to make the most of it. With deep respect to the Elders, we wanted to share their words. With respect to readers, we wanted to point out a few things worth noting.

First, you might notice the traditional way in which the Elders introduced themselves, explaining who they were by telling you where they came from. They gave you their names, the places they come from, and the places where they currently live. They spoke of their parents, their grandparents, and the traditional lives of their people.

Next, a little background. We had asked them to share their thoughts on Alaska Natives and education, and many of them spoke of their boarding school experiences. The boarding school era could be its own difficult dialogue.\* Stretching from the 1900's through about the 1970's, it was a time when most Alaska Native children were required to leave their homes and villages to attend Western-style boarding schools. The Elders grew up with this system, and they found it limiting at best and damaging at worst. The schools prepared them to live in the Western world but also took from them the opportunity to learn their traditional ways. There were abuses of many kinds, ranging from negative stereotyping to punishments for speaking Native languages to physical and sexual abuse. Even in the best of times at the best of the schools, they were not learning how to be a real human being.

A few of them referred indirectly to the many scourges that have ravaged their communities. Region-wide outbreaks of influenza, tuberculosis, polio, and other diseases brought by outsiders have devastated Alaska Native communities many times over the past few centuries, causing them to lose half or more of their populations in very short periods of time, destroying families, and disrupting traditional life. For this reason among others, girls of the Elders' generation were encouraged to marry young, and many of them dropped out of school with no more than an eighth grade education—if they even got that far. These events are not over. Their legacies are with us still, today.

Iarion is still moved when he thinks of the Elders that day. “They spoke of understanding, endurance, courage, and their great responsibility and strong desire to teach traditional ways to the younger people. Western educational paradigms teach little about how to live. Traditional ways respect the life support systems of our planet, show us how to live sustainably, and teach us to use what we call common sense, by which we mean how to live. We need these skills more than ever today.”

\* See Hirshberg among others.



## Reflection

Elders teach ways of living that respect the earth and all its life forms. Should our educational systems do the same? How might we change our own teaching to reflect this value?