

Gilah Yelin HIRSCH

**ESKIMOS HAVE NO WORD OR CONCEPT FOR ‘FUTURE’:
CULTURAL SUICIDE IN NUNAVUT**

At the end of September 2006 I visited Cambridge Bay, Nunavut, the North Pole. The purpose of my visit was to film Inuit in their habitat, land and culture. I was focusing on their language Inuktitut, wishing to find examples of the writing to include in my film “Reading the Landscape”. Before I left for the North Pole, I could not imagine how profoundly this trip would change my life.

It took two days to get there: Los Angeles to Salt Lake, Utah, to Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, to Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, to Cambridge Bay, Nunavut. Each successive flight was in an increasingly smaller plane. The cost was exponentially higher than anywhere else I had traveled in the world. A staggering cost of close to \$4000 to and from Edmonton to Yellow Knife to Cambridge Bay alone, as only private planes ply those territories. This was in addition to the flight costs and necessary layover to and from Los Angeles and Edmonton. The last plane, from Yellowknife to Cambridge Bay, more disc-like than cylindrical, was designed to fly over the Arctic Circle. The Eskimos on both sides of me in the little roundish plane told me on take off that our heads would “explode” when we crossed the Arctic Circle. And we all suffered extremely when it did seem that our heads were exploding for several minutes, and then subsided, as we entered another magnetic field.

I was hosted by the elder Bill Lyall, one of the founders of Nunavut, and certainly the man in charge of the hamlet of Cambridge Bay, 500 miles north of the Arctic Circle, at the southeast shore of Victoria Island, Nunavut. Bill picked me up at the tiny airport, a very small building seemingly dropped randomly on the tundra. Eskimos crammed the small space thrilled to see their arriving friends and relatives, all carrying large packages of food and clothing as well as bushy leafy plants and live birds in cages that they had placed beneath their seats.

Bill drove me over to the hotel five minutes away in an enormous pickup with wheels as high as a small house. He had arranged for me to stay in the only hotel in town, a two storey Quonset metal building at the cost \$200/night for a room that made Motel 6 look like the Ritz. Food was equally expensive – a pair of eggs \$12. There were hardly any fruits or vegetables but musk ox was cheap and plentiful and a bit gamier than the yak I ate in Tibet.

This remote enclave was built in 1957 when the US and Canadian Governments built the DEW Line to help protect against the feared Russian missiles allegedly targeting the west during the Cold War. Although the original Dew line was decommissioned in 1997, it was recommissioned after 9/11. The immense white globes headquartering the military establishment stand like immense Buckminster Fuller dodecahedron snowballs on the infinitely flat tundra, visible everywhere, a short walk from “downtown” Cambridge Bay. The electricity carrying lines themselves are clearly visible on the tundra when not buried in snow. My trip had been arranged by a friend in the Canadian government who knew Bill because of his many political visits to Ottawa on behalf of the people of Nunavut. Yet Bill was hardly welcoming when I arrived. It was clear that Bill was suspicious of me. I was sure he was thinking, “Who is this woman who comes to the top of the world alone, where does she think she’s coming when she arrives in that medium weight red jacket that wouldn’t even keep the cold out in Edmonton?”

Bill had been informed several times over a period of five months of exactly what I was searching, and I had agreed to arrive at a time that was convenient for him, as he travels

consistently around Nunavut. When Bill dropped me at the hotel, he told me to visit him at the Co-op after I settled in. Faced with a raging blizzard I had immediately changed into my polar parka as soon as I got to the Arctic Lodge and was deeply wrapped in Arctic gear when I visited Bill at the Co-op as requested two hours later. Sean, the Caucasian man from Prince Edward Island hired to run the Arctic Lodge, had been impressed that Bill himself brought me in. He told me that Bill was the most important man in Cambridge Bay and in Nunavut, and had, among many achievements, founded the Co-op, the first all-purpose establishment.

I could barely make out the red STOP sign in English and Inuktitut through the blinding blizzard as I walked to the Co-op, not quite five minutes from the hotel. Parkas and winter gear occupied a good third of the store, household needs another, canned and frozen food, the rest. Hardly any produce was to be found in the refrigerated section of the food corner, but musk ox meat patties and Arctic Char (fish) seemed the most prevalent food, either fresh or frozen.

When I was ushered into Bill's small simple office, he eyed my gear with approval and greeted me with a little less animosity. I realized that I was being tested. In no uncertain terms he began the brief conversation by saying "I cannot help you. If the people see me with you, they will think that I am getting something out of this for myself. I have to live here!"

A bit stunned and terribly disappointed, I replied that I understood his position, not to worry about me; I had been all over the world alone and had always managed to find what I needed.

I left and walked through the blizzard stopping in at the elementary and high schools and various community buildings to ask about the language and alphabet. I was moved by the illustrated signs and slogans I saw everywhere, particularly in the school halls, which presented and illustrated the Eight Values in three languages - Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun, the most widely spoken Eskimo languages in Nunavut, as well as English: Apologize, Helping, Teamwork, Consensus, Conservation, Acceptance, Unity, Resource-fullness. I discovered many other instructional slogans such as "You are Loved", and "Respect Our Elders" decorating the walls.

I ate in the small dining room of the Arctic Lodge, the only restaurant or social venue in town. Local kids, sometimes carrying their toddler siblings on their backs, always having several children in tow, were there whenever the dining room was open, buying sweets, and gossiping about the adults present and laughing hysterically. Several of the tables were occupied by obviously dating couples, the women astonishingly chicly dressed - three inch heels and deep décolleté (at the North Pole)! and the men suave, trying to impress, both clearly nervous.

The next morning there was a telephone message at the hotel that Bill wanted to see me at the Co-op. When I visited Bill the second time, he already knew that I had talked with everyone in town who would speak with me. I was gathering materials that I needed, despite Bill's active avoidance of me, and the downright hostility of the principals of the elementary and high school. He also knew that I had visited the Kitikmeot Heritage Society and Cultural Center of the Library, which shared the building with the high school. Emily Angulalik, the librarian, and by training a linguist, was very interested in my project and said she would help me. She agreed to translate, write and record the 25 words I had given her into Inuktitut (for a fee \$150 cash), and suggested that I go see various people at the several campuses, meaning, small metal buildings, of Arctic College.

"I can't help you", Bill began as he had on day one, "but since you did travel this long way to get here, I'll drive you out onto the tundra early Saturday morning for an hour and show you the muskoxen."

“Are you sure you can spare the time and possibly create a problem for yourself?” I asked genuinely worried about that this could jeopardize his standing in the community.

“Just one hour very early. People won’t be out and about yet”. I began to listen for his colloquialisms.

I spent the next two days walking all over town. At the height of the short summer, the population of greater Cambridge Bay, which includes hundreds of miles, reaches 1300. The population shrinks to diehards in the dark, 60 below Fahrenheit winter, since whoever can, leaves for the winter and the crews of supply ships, and other seasonal workers are gone. I walked many times up and down unpaved, heavily pot-holed Main Street, through the side “streets” away from the center of town, and along the shore all around three sides of the town. There was a huge supply ship anchored in the harbor. The crew ate in the dining room of the Arctic Lodge when I did. They were obviously interested in the presence of a new female in town.

I was thrilled every evening by the great cosmic light show of Aurora Borealis. The nightly event began at sunset with unusually variegated bands and veils of light that seemed to melt into the rising ethereal Lights as it grew dark. By 11:30 PM the multicolored Northern Lights were swirling, cascading, intertwining, unabashedly dancing through the universe. Despite the bone-chilling cold I walked each night until I sat on a ledge or stair or rock, bundled in many layers of down and Gortex, watching the quintessential sacred art event provided by this heavenly theater. As a painter I was particularly awed by this spectacle. Why paint at all when this ultimate shimmying array of color moves the soul via a shifting atmospheric canvas of infinite scale? I was told that in winter, when it is dark twenty-four hours a day, the veils of spectrum hued reflected lights that wave and dance and soar throughout the sky, come so low that they brush the ice causing the emission of sounds. A cosmic symphony is heard as the frequency of each color is translated into the analogous frequency of sound creating discrete notes that roar, rumble, chirp, sing and cough, accompanying the visual extravaganza.

Good as his word, Bill Lyall arrived very early that Saturday morning and drove me onto the endless flat tundra to experience the beauty of the landscape. He showed me the odd outcroppings - the only low, long legendary, anthropomorphic hilly parts of the land in hundreds of miles. These hills are said to be the mythic bodies of the family of giant-gods who walked that territory eons ago and are renowned for having invented death. Bill showed me the Inukshuks, traditional piled stone markers in the form of humans. Every tribal hunter would be able to read the clues intrinsic in the construction, describing where the caribou were heading, where the fish were plentiful, etc. He showed me the stark modern Christian graveyard - small wooden crosses in orderly rows, just behind the town, facing the bay of the Arctic Ocean.

Bill drove to the herd of muskoxen (which I ate at breakfast and dinner). He suggested we drive close and hide behind the open truck door, which we did. When I looked at those huge humped landscape-like animals, covered with cayenne colored fur and lavish tobacco-golden manes, I remarked to my guide, “They remind me of camels”.

“What’s a camel?” the Eskimo asked.

I told him about the “ships of the desert” and the yaks of Tibet, and Orangutans I had lived with in Sumatra. He became fascinated, wanted to learn more about the world. In a genuine gesture of unmitigated warmth and friendship, looking for common experience, he asked me “Where were you on 9/11?” We recounted our stories bridging worlds which had just before seemed unbridgeable. We were both humans who had shared and survived a global calamity.

Bill told me he had knocked on my hotel room door at 11:30 the night before to urge me to see a particularly exquisite display of Lights. He was impressed when I told him I had been out there, hypnotized by the beauty, until two in the morning.

It was Bill who exhorted me not to use the word Inuit which I had been schooled to use as politically correct. He explained that Inuit means “humankind” in Inuktitut, while Eskimo means the people who eat raw meat, and “this is who we are!” He told me that due to the extreme hardships of the climate and austerity of life, hardly anyone comes that far north and white people are definitely not welcome. White hunters arrive to kill the sacred animals for trophies. Others have discovered diamond veins and have undermined and destroyed the land by mining. While other white gold-diggers pillage oil from the delicate tundra.

The trip to the tundra, furtive in the very early morning departure, was supposed to be only one hour. However, as Bill learned more and more about my life and mission to preserve cultures worldwide, he warmed to me, told me his own story and the one hour extended to six.

Bill told me the terrible history of the destruction of his people which happened so quickly, within his/(my) generation. The first missionaries to reach Cambridge Bay were the Anglicans in 1932. Now, of the twenty or so buildings on “Main Street”, seven are Christian churches. The largest, the pretty white with red trim wooden Anglican church, with service in Inuktitut, is attended only by the few remaining elders. Most popular is the Pentecostal Church, although in one of the smallest wood houses in town. Bill, like most of the Eskimo children, had been kidnapped by missionaries when he was a very small child. Hundreds of children had been taken to residential schools as far away as the northern states of the United States and were systematically brain washed and renamed with Christian names. They were forbidden to use their language, practice their culture, abused in every way, not educated, and cut loose at fourteen with no education, trade or identity. It was only in the late nineties that this practice was outlawed in Canada. Bill managed to get training as a mechanic and followed the jobs north, until he heard that the DEW Line needing mechanics. He reached Cambridge Bay, not knowing that this was his home, but soon became aware, that like a homing pigeon, he had returned to the place of his birth. He became an activist, and in 1997 became one of the founders of the Eskimo homeland, Nunavut, set apart from the Northwest Territories in the northernmost areas of the Canadian Arctic.

It was also from Bill that I first learned that one or more males in each family commits suicide by the time they are twenty, and of the remaining men, most are suicides or homicides by the time they are forty. The day before I got to Cambridge Bay, there was a highly publicized “Celebration of Life” festival, trying to give Eskimos a reason to live, rather than to commit suicide. Eskimo women will not stay with Eskimo men because they are so abusive and violent, and prefer to be alone or hook up temporarily with white men doing stints in the military or those who work on supply ships that stop in Cambridge Bay the few months that weather permits. Almost all of the children are of mixed parentage and are raised by single women.

In another of my suddenly invited visits to Bill at the Co-op – a telephone message relayed to me by Sean - he told me that I must visit an elder, but reiterated “I cannot help you” in setting up such a visit.

“Go to the Anglican Church on Sunday...that’s where the elders go,” he exhorted. “They may invite you for tea...”

On Sunday morning I visited the various churches on my way to the picturesque Anglican Church at the end of Main Street, the same denomination that had kidnapped Bill and so many others. I was lured away from my destination by the loud singing that spilled out of the tiny

Pentecostal Evangelical church, and entered into the extremely crowded joyous environment. The Eskimo pastor sang and played guitar, while at the side of the pews, a piano and drum set completed the band. The congregation was singing, praying, dancing, rolling on the floor, testifying, crying, speaking in tongues – the most emotion I had seen displayed in Cambridge Bay. This is a culture of deadpan expression. To learn Inuktitut one must place a pencil between one's teeth to practice not to open one's mouth as one breath too long could kill in extreme cold. But here, no holds barred, a frenzied church experience rivaled only by a similar experience in Compton or Watts, African American cities in Southern California.

A few yards away across the unpaved road I entered the Anglican Church, distinguished by its austere yet classic English wood architecture. A dozen elders snoozed and snored loudly in the front pews as the service was intoned in monotone Inuktitut by a female lay priest. I could not sense spirit here. But I was taken by the beauty and surprising subject matter of the stained glass windows around the exterior walls, as well as the unusual felt murals above the altar. I had entered a world of Christian-Eskimo imagery – parka clad people on the ice in front of igloos, an in-gathering white Jesus in the sky. This church was so silent and lifeless that I could almost hear strains of the rapturous Pentecostals across the way screaming and singing and ecstatically praising Jesus through the clapboard walls.

I was invited to tea by the welcoming lay pastor after the service. I asked permission to photograph the church windows and the murals - the only art, in a western sense, I had seen in Cambridge Bay. Vivid in color and culture specific in conception, I could imagine how the images must have captured the earliest congregants. I joined the elders who sat close together on threadbare couches and rickety chairs in a small, low room at the front of the church. While the men mostly wore commercially made parkas with frontal zippers, all the women were dressed in their beautiful handmade, often embroidered slip-over-the-head parkas, topped by “sunbursts” of many kinds of fur. I wished I could photograph them right there. However, sensing the hostility towards me as soon as I got to Cambridge Bay, I realized then that I had to scotch my film plans and only surreptitiously would I take stills with my smallest camera hidden in my glove – and only then from an unseen position. One evening when I walked about town, thinking that I was invisible as it was dark, I photographed Eskimo teenagers on their dune buggies getting drunk and stoned outside the smoke shack which also rents videos. The boys saw me and hurled torrents of invectives my way. Ultimately they were right, I thought. On another evening I had surreptitiously photographed the big event of the week – teenage boys on speeding skidoos skimming across a lake at the edge of town. If they managed to cross the lake they were heroes. If not, they slid into the icy waters, and had to retrieve the skidoos from the deep frigid water.

The elders, the pastor and I drank tea and ate mannok (fried bread) in the warmed room. Although we examined each other, we could not converse as we were languages apart. I knew they were talking about me, about my red hair, my freckled white skin, about a woman so far north, alone. I hankered to photograph the compelling elder woman in her handsome red embroidered parka and the little girl in her blue one, sitting side by side across me. I restrained my desire and trained my eyes into memory.

After church I decided to stop in at the Cultural Center to see whether I could pick up the translations that Emily had readied for me.

“I’ve arranged a visit to an elder’s home in ten minutes, at 1 pm”, she reported proudly. We walked quickly to a Quonset house on another “street”. This was one of a set of houses given by the Canadian government in support of the elders. Maria and her granddaughter, whom she was

raising, lived in half the house. I was delighted to find that these were the two I had so wished to photograph at the Anglican church tea. The interview took place in the kitchen/living room.

I could barely believe what I beheld. The elder, Maria Kaotalok, and her granddaughter, Matok-Kaotalok, called Tracy Ann in school, were dressed in their traditional parkas in an ultra modern kitchen which included a microwave, electric stove and refrigerator, washer and dryer, dishwasher, blender, toaster oven and pictures of Jesus on all the walls, as well as magnetized to the fridge door. With Emily as translator to and from Inuktitut, I heard Maria's story. Now 65, the oldest woman in Cambridge Bay, she had grown up in a nomadic life on dogsleds following the tribal hunt. I had already been told that babies are born within the roomy parkas while women are riding the dogsleds, the men barely aware that a momentous event is taking place immediately next to them. The infant is carried in a sling under the parka against the breast of the naked mother who can nurse on demand, and care for the infants' needs always protected beneath the parka. At three months, a different sling is created for the infant to ride the naked back of the mother, and is easily rotated to nurse. At one year old, an additional compartment is created under the back of the parka to allow the baby to still be close on the back of the mother although now they are both clothed lightly. When the baby is two another compartment is sewn into the outside of the parka within the great hood, where the child will ride for a number of years, snuggled deeply inside the hood, close to the mother.

My education into Eskimo culture launched by Bill Lyall on the tundra was continued between Emily and Maria,. I learned that the culture was and still is matriarchal. It is the grandmother who declares when it is time to saddle the dogs and ready the sleds for the six month ritual hunt. All everyday village activity is dropped as suddenly as the hunt is announced and everyone prepares for the long difficult foray onto the tundra. Only one animal is killed to feed the tribe, and all of it is used to provide food, shelter, oil and clothing for the tribe. The animal is revered, ritually slaughtered, its bones ceremoniously laid out and buried in special formation. There is no waste.

The very few dogs I saw were depressed, sometimes howling pet huskies, chained outside the houses. I was told that no one uses dogsleds there anymore, although I saw some parked on the fringes of town. Dogs are seen at best as nuisance in Cambridge Bay. These animals of such immense energy, born to work hard, are severely frustrated and easily get into lethal fights. Dogs are shot regularly. Rabies is something that every child can identify. Skidoos are the vehicle of choice, as well as off-road dune buggies, that pollute the pure air with noxious fumes and the pristine environment with screeching noise.

"What about medicine and shamanic rituals", I asked Maria through Emily. Maria's eyes brightened then darkened. She related that there used to be many shamans and medicine people. No more. Then both Maria and Emily told that there are still very few shamans who are secret and closeted known only to a handful of elders, because the time is not right, nor are there people well enough equipped emotionally, psychically to carry the knowledge. These secret shamans are containing their knowledge until they find those who are ready to receive it and use it skillfully. There may be only one such secret shaman at any time who is the repository of all esoteric knowledge. Public revelation of the knowledge may take several generations, they both agreed. Each said that she knew at least one shaman in town, but most residents no longer knew them. Western medicine, as western religion, was now needed to deal with the white man's diseases that the missionaries brought with them. Divorced from their traditional active life, now sedentary and eating sugars and fats, Eskimos are plagued by Diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, AIDS and cancer.

What was their thought about global warming, I asked. Both women said that it had become much warmer, and that animal cycles were changing as a result of the warmer climate. Both said that by that time of year, end of September, there used to be many feet of snow on the ground and annually less and less. Both attributed the change to natural evolutionary cycles of the earth. Neither woman expressed any concern that this phenomenon was caused by humankind and that it should be contained, restrained or reversed.

In 1957 Maria's father heard that workers were needed in Cambridge Bay to build the Dew Line, and he, as other Eskimos, arrived with his family on dogsleds looking for work. Maria married there, had four sons, all of whom had committed suicide when very young. The daughters-in-law had all gone south as they call it, to Yellowknife, and Matok was left to be raised by her grandmother. When I told the women that Matok means sweet in Hebrew and is often used as a pet name, they both asked what is Hebrew. Jesus spoke Hebrew, I said. They both grinned broadly, and I knew I had been accepted. Maria's, as every story that was told to me, included various suicides in the immediate as well as extended family. At the end of the hour long interview I asked Emily to ask Maria if she had one wish what would it be. Emily told me that it was not possible to translate "wish" as there is no concept or word for wish, or future, or anything having to do with the future. There are many, many words describing the landscape, snow, weather, situations in the present, but no future, Emily related. Astonished, I asked Emily to ask Maria if she had a goal. Yes, the next step.

It was at that moment that the crushing truth hit me hard. Why so many suicides? Here is a culture that had lived successfully and fully in the present, for a hundred thousand years with artifacts found that were made as early as 75, 000 years ago. Missionaries arrived in the 1930's and by the '40s the kids were kidnapped, brainwashed and abused. Christianity, which is founded on a belief of the future, was slapped onto and then layered into a culture that does not have a word or concept for future. The DEW line brought electricity to Cambridge Bay. Thus the subsequent generation would have access to radio and TV via satellite. Living remotely on an island in the Arctic Ocean, they see and begin to desire everything that exists in the south. Young people go "down south" to Yellowknife thinking they will become urban Eskimos. They have no social or economic skills for city life, are quickly addicted to alcohol, drugs, and gambling which enslaves them to ever growing credit card debts. Unable to adapt, they return, humiliated, to Cambridge Bay, and commit suicide very soon. Those who never left become equally addicted and indebted as alcohol and drugs are smuggled into Cambridge Bay (officially a dry town), and spiral downward just as quickly to suicide.

In half a generation, ancient tribal life based on the nomadic dog sled ritual hunt had ended. Life in the present, breath by breath, the reverence toward the land, the animals, light and dark, and the Aurora Borealis, had been supplanted with belief in one or another form of Christianity. The contradictory, irreconcilable beliefs between a culture that has no concept of future and a religion that dwells in the future leads ultimately to a present of addiction, suicide, and homicide.

That night as I sat on the frozen tundra of the North Pole, huddled down deep in my polar gear, wrapped in extra shawls, watching the perpetually changing heavenly light show, I realized that my world view had profoundly shifted. Up until then, I had held the received knowledge that humans were the inheritors of the earth. Then I understood that we, like all other species, are just a blip in evolutionary history, and that we too would disappear in time as had all our antecedents before us. This realization continues to reform my perspective. (My great grandfather in Bialystok, Poland, Rabbi Arye Leib Yelin, had written the last entry into the Bavli Talmud,

called “Yefeh Aynayim”. Literally these words mean “beautiful eyes”. The substance is about changing perspectival world views.)

The very recent history of the Eskimos of Nunavut was heartbreaking. I often felt choked with despair during the remaining days while I continued speaking with various people, gathering materials, books, newspapers, photographing where I could, and was invited to different homes. The kids, especially the prepubescent girls followed me everywhere and spent long hours with me in my tiny room at the Arctic Lodge piled on the bed. We discussed their lives, their dreams, their favorite TV “soaps”, clothes, hairstyles and nail polish, and they begged me to take them back to Los Angeles with me.

A telephone message on my last full day invited me to meet Bill again at the Co-op. He asked me what I had found, whom I had spoken with and in a most friendly, collegial manner, voiced his cogent, insightful opinions about each of the people, agreeing wholly with my assessment, both of the individuals and the dire nature of the situation. It was then that he told me he had created the Aboriginal Healing Organization, to preserve and maintain the old shamanic ways of medicine and divination. He was heading an archiving project, recording the histories of the few remaining elders. He has instituted the mandatory study of Inuktitut and Inuinnaqtun in the schools. And he has reinstated the six month tribal hunt, luring the youth into the traditional dogsled ritual. I told Bill of meeting Elisabeth Hadlari, a white woman who had married Eskimo 30 years earlier, and was the founding director of the Arctic Coast Visitor Center. Elisabeth, a gifted artist in her own right, is the mother of four sons who were all raised in the traditional manner, and are all away at universities across Canada intending to return to Cambridge Bay. Committed to perpetuating the rapidly vanishing culture, Elisabeth is leading workshops in traditional felting made by weaving “quiviut”(musk ox underfur), as well as classes in the ancient art of carving caribou antler. Elisabeth has been inviting youth to live “the old way” in her remote “summer house”, several miles away from town, close to the giant-gods’ hills. There they hunt, fish, cook, live in the traditional ways, learning the myths and lore of the ancestors. Elisabeth bid me ride the back of her motorcycle when I accepted her invitation to her home to show me her paintings and jewelry and the many marvelous parkas she had made and embroidered for her family. I now wear a silver donut form which says in Inuktitut, “oot-jir-toot-ce-ar-necq (meaning total awareness in the moment), the Eskimo way of life.

Elisabeth was very enthusiastic about my “Reading the Landscape” film project and promised to send photos of Inuktitut forms in the landscape. By this time, I had learned that Inuktitut was traditionally an oral language, but in the 1870s, Edmund Peck, an Anglican missionary adapted the Cree syllabary to Inuktitut. The Inuktitut letters were identical to those I had found in every other alphabet in the world. And these shapes are identical to the five forms I had identified in nature as alphabetic morphology, which mirror the shapes of neurons and neural patterns of perception and cognition. By showing that these forms were universally adopted when alphabets were invented, I hypothesized that since we are universally hardwired alike, we are behaviorally more alike than we are different.

Bill and Elisabeth and other members of the Hamlet Council fight over the issue of tourism. They are definitely against the invasion of group tours. Younger members of the Council consider them reactionary and want to see the revenue that tour groups would bring. They want to build golf courses, and promote hunting and fishing.

“Allow only single or coupled travelers,” I suggested when Bill asked me what I would do. “Tour groups will sign and seal the demise of Cambridge Bay as you know it.”

I told him about my experience in Tibet, Bhutan, and Japan and many other dying civilizations.

I considered the “advanced culture” of the United States and Canada. In the 1960s the big news in modern psychology was Richard Alpert’s (Ram Dass) “Be Here Now” - live in the present as all the rest is illusion. While the New Age consciousness movement was birthed into an ever growing business, those who had lived that way for untold millennia were paradoxically being forced into oblivion by the very countries that were unknowingly heralding their worldview as messianic.

Bill offered to take me to the airport. I asked if he would consider coming to universities and conferences in the US to talk about the Eskimos from his life-long, informed perspective. He told me that he would soon celebrate his 65th birthday, one of the few men to have reached that age. He would then retire from his many directorial posts and would indeed consider such an invitation. He told me he truly understood why I came and what I was doing in my life to benefit his culture, and he thanked me. He invited me to join the six month tribal hunt and told me that his family would adopt me for this purpose. In this way I would learn a great deal more about the Eskimos. I had passed the test. He then asked if my husband would allow me to join the tribal hunt for six months. I told him I had no husband. Ah, he reflected, no man could allow a woman so much freedom.

The next morning, there was a message that Bill had had to leave Cambridge Bay very early to attend to an emergency in another distant settlement. When it came time to pay my bill I asked Sean why things were so expensive in Cambridge Bay, in my experience the most expensive place in the world. Two reasons, he said: the first was that since the tribal hunt was no longer the source of food and subsistence, everything that was used or eaten had to be imported by ship or plane, season and weather permitting. The second: they want to keep white people out of Cambridge Bay, considering the damage that had been done to the land and culture by white outsiders. Sean then informed me that my bill had been cut in half in appreciation of what I was doing on behalf of Eskimo culture. During the short drive to the little airport, Sean told me that Bill was also the founding director of the Arctic Lodge. It had been his decision to halve my bill.

I was vividly struck by the sheer poignancy of the 23, 000 Eskimos spread over the largest territory in the world, at the threshold of extinction. Relentless and inevitable as globalization, consumerization and desacrification may seem, this culture may possibly be sustained. Of the four civilizations I had witnessed on the eve of their annihilation, perhaps it is the very remoteness of Nunavut that stands in its favor. The fact that contemporary Eskimos do not fare well in urban settings may be a blessing in disguise, as they do return to their native homes. The zeal to restore tribal rituals as much as possible within the original surroundings by activists such as Bill Lyall may yet take hold and win the despairing youth. The advent of electricity and modern conveniences within the ancient context may make life more palatable to the youth and give them greater incentive to live there. Restoration of the lost arts, language, and culture may well revive that formerly pure lifestyle and instigate an indigenous economy. And retaining the high dollar cost of visiting this special enclave will act as a deterrent to those who wish to “knock off” one of the last sacred outposts of the world.

Cultures and indigenous practices have historically been expunged for the profit of those with economic power. Thousands of characters in ancient alphabets such as Chinese and Japanese are being eradicated, while other alphabets are becoming Romanized so that they can be easily computerized. Nuance, idiom, and subtleties available only through the original languages are inevitably lost. Literature is abandoned, and history can easily be revised to suit

the government of the moment, as fewer scholars have incentive to study ancient alphabets. Languages are forgotten as the emphasis on business deconstructs culture while English homogenizes purpose and meaning.

Medical and spiritual practices that have proven effective in so many indigenous cultures are being excised in favor of western protocol, as paradoxically, we in the west realize that these ancient practices are indeed efficacious and are used more and more to augment western medicine.

The booming business of tour groups to indigenous areas is growing rapidly as well-heeled educated baby boomers live longer and demand stimulating “rough” adventure in Five Star comfort. “Drug tourism” in South American countries kills the cultures and harms the tourists. Insensitive and random adoption of long held esoteric rituals of indigenous cultures demeans the hosts and puts the guests at risk.

We stand at the threshold of global cultural suicide and homicide. As cultures and sacred sites become secularized, we must move toward sacralizing relationships. In order to preserve that which binds communities together, *we* must become the gods, individually and collectively. Divinity is in humanity and spirituality is in behavior. By being appreciative, sensitive to the differences while basking in the commonalities, we consecrate relationships which propel all action toward the greater good.