

“Aatak Ayguumun Angwaaghnaqi – Keep Paddling Against the Wind”
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Know who you are and where you come from * Share what you have, giving makes you richer * Respect all mankind, animals, and nature * Be kind even when it's hard at times * Treat people equally * Listen to Elders * Lead by example * Be trustworthy * Pass on traditional values * Be happy and positive * Uplift others

I was born at a time when changes were fairly new at home; no television, telephones, or computers. Some were good and some were bad. We were forced to adapt to the changes because our culture was conquered by the Westerners upon arrival. Many of our traditions were taken away, but some were only put to sleep. Today we are seeing changes with some of our traditions coming back to life again.

I moved to Anchorage, Alaska in 1997 for several reasons. I was not prepared mentally, emotionally, physically, or spiritually for what was to come. I was afraid when I first arrived. Moving to Anchorage felt like I was moving to a foreign country, because the ways of the dominant culture were very different than our way of life. As the missionaries stated that we were “backwards people” when they arrived to the villages.

Some changes were very challenging for me. It took me years to adapt to being around people of different races and cultures. It was difficult for me to get to know people of different cultures, but some not so much. It took me several years to adapt to Western ways of communication. I learned through my observation they spoke at a faster pace, shorter pauses in between, or no pauses at all cutting other people off. We were given many different styles of communication by Creator to use as a tool; not one culture's way of communication is right or wrong. There are differences and we just must learn to accept the them. Just because one speaks the same tone without pitch, does not mean their style is wrong. Listen to the words they are saying, that's what is important.

I am learning more and more about myself as I experience Western culture. I am discovering new things with each experience. I am learning how to survive in a world very different than our people. The more I experience, the more I learn, the more I put puzzle pieces together, and the more I understand.

Living in a world so different than our people made me realize how important it is to teach the natural laws or traditional values of our people. We are one with our people, one with nature, one with animals, and one with Creator. When we are together, we are stronger. There will come a time when we must come together and work together, even if we don't like our neighbors or co-workers. This is one of our strengths. How do we expect to live together in villages, towns, and cities? It is very important to share our knowledge and the values taught for it makes this world a better place. When different cultures teach each other, we have a better understanding and more respect for each other.

So many things were done differently that didn't make sense to me when I first moved. I had to crawl out of my skin and force myself to face many challenges and mingle with them. I was forced to familiarize and get comfortable with the challenges that were coming at me so fast and loud! I felt like a lost child in the middle of nowhere. How I missed being on my grandfather's shoulders, so peaceful and content! How is it I went from such a peaceful world to fast paced and loud? I'm okay with it now for the most part. I am now an urbanized Native. It isn't a bad thing if I remember who I am, what I was taught,

and where I come from. I must balance my life in two different worlds and make the best possible choices.

I had to force myself to sing the English language and to speak at rate I was not comfortable with. My heart and mind would race, and I'd stumble on my words. I would get embarrassed when I didn't know how to put words into sentences and I would freeze, "How do I say it?" I was so afraid to speak English as it is my second language. I didn't want people to make fun of me or look down at me. I used to be scared to even order food from any restaurant. Today I am more comfortable. My grandfather's quote says, "Whenever you don't know what to say, say what's in your heart. Don't matter how it sounds, what's important is what it means". It helps me feel better when I remember his words. My African-American husband says if I struggle, "Say it in Yupik first, and then say it in English". This helps me too.

I used to be afraid of making new friends of different races. I only knew what to expect from our people. I was afraid to make new friends because I knew through my observations that we had so many differences. I was afraid of getting to know what was different than mine. I was afraid of asking questions or being asked questions. I was afraid I wouldn't know how to answer or understand what they were saying. I was embarrassed to let people know my vocabulary was not wide as English speakers only. I didn't want people to think I was slow. However, a woman who also helped me to feel better said, "You speak two languages, your vocabulary is much wider than English speakers only".

It was awkward for me to sit next to a non-Native who found silence to be awkward because all I could think of was how the weather is, "It's a beautiful day". Silence is comforting to me. It doesn't matter if you spend time with others in silence, presence is all that matters. We don't need to state the obvious. "How are you?" to me is a filler. People who are awkward with silence tend to ask others how they are doing. So basically, what they are saying is, "I don't really want to know how you're doing, but how are you?" Then an Elder tells you everything about themselves and you wonder, "Why are they telling me everything about themselves?" You asked.

My role as a Yupik woman is to speak my mother's tongue, to pack foods away gathered from the land and sea, to skin sew, to teach the values of our people, to pluck duck and cut fish, to share what I have, and to always know who I am and where I come from. My role as an American citizen is to work Monday-Friday from 9am-5pm, to support my family, and pay my taxes. Which one is the right way? Both are important because we must balance our lives if we come from more than one culture.

I remember I was re-organizing chairs, and the room was full of teenagers. Not one single teenager offered to help. I was disappointed at myself because I realized that I was part of the fault for not teaching the values of the Native people. We get up to help without being asked, especially our Elders. We knew when to help those in need. That's just the way it is.

I would hurt for our people when the outside world judged us for our subsistence way of life. People often questioned us, "Why hunt for seals and whales?" We hunt for seals and whales for the same reason people buy meat from the store, for survival. We must go get our own food because of the lack of employment and because this is our way of life. When Creator first made earth, he placed many different animals in every part of the world. You will not find walrus in the waters of New York City, there are no caribou in the lands of Miami, and you will not find reindeer in Salt Lake City. There are no polar bears in Los Angeles, no kangaroos in Nome, and no zebras in Anchorage. Humans did not choose these animals for their people, they were chosen for us.

Having to use handshakes was odd to me when I first moved, when all we do is greet each other with a nod. A firm handshake is a sign of respect in the Western culture. What about those eyebrows? Yes! "I don't know" might mean, "It's up to you", or "I don't want to tell you", or, "I don't know how to tell you or put it in words". You will sense it when you understand the differences.

I never knew what racism felt like until I moved to Anchorage. I remember I was in line to purchase clothes for my kids at Sears. There was a cashier who was non-Native. She looked over my shoulder and asked the customer behind me if she could help her. The woman behind me told the cashier lady, "You have a customer in front of me". I did not want to embarrass the cashier, so I got closer to her and whispered in her ear, "What's wrong with me? Is it the color of my skin?" I walked away hurt. I left after what I needed to say. I was also told by a man to, "Go back to where you came from", so I told him I would put up a tent in his backyard. Native people get stereotyped as "drunk Natives". Remember the successful Natives will not be seen on the streets, because they are working for the people. Some of us are successful providers through a subsistence way of life to feed our people. We take care of each other. What can we do but to educate people by sharing about our Native cultures?

I have adapted to a certain degree in this second world. Things aren't as foreign as they used to be, however some things still are. I miss the ocean, I miss the pace, and I miss that community feeling. I am not afraid to speak English. I am not afraid to stand up for myself. I have taught myself how to sing the English language. I have friends of many colors and walks of life that I value and appreciate. I have learned so much from some of them.

Today, I am happy with my city life but not a 100%. It doesn't mean I will stop being Yupik. I will always be Yupik no matter where I go. City life is so much more convenient, but city life also spoils people. Everything is available to you and food comes packaged. We don't have to worry about how far out to travel to get our food, or worry about being gone for days or weeks, or worry about having enough hunting tools or hunting partners. It is much harder at home. I appreciate all our hunters and providers. They take care of all of us and make sure no one goes hungry by sharing.

When you go to the store, or go to the gas station, make sure you thank people who work in those places. Without them we wouldn't be able to get what we need. Without our parents, Elders, teachers, hunters, doctors, cooks, bus drivers we would not be a community. We live together as a human race for survival purposes. Always acknowledge others and lift them up. Use love always use love.