

Healthy Community

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We were strong in mind and body!

We were creative and adaptable!

We were adventurous and fiercely independent!

We lived in very isolated and challenging areas but found ways to meet and live in harmony with the land!

To have healthy communities in 2006, I believe that we Inuit need to draw on our strengths from the past and find a way to integrate them into our life today. We have to identify our strengths, as well as our weaknesses—what has been shown to us from our experience with change—and find ways to turn this experience into new strengths.

When I was asked to make a keynote speech for this Conference, I thought back to our way of life in Naujaat–Repulse Bay in the 1950s and 1960s, to the community I left in 1964, when Inuit were still living in iglus in the winter and tents in the summer. I was born in an iglu and lived the iglu life for my first 12 years. My parents, and the Inuit we lived with, taught me many things. Today I draw on that knowledge for strength and inspiration in my personal, family, and community life. I believe that all of us have to look to our personal past and that of our culture to find what we need to lead us in the challenges of today and find what can be done to have healthy communities.

I think your culture, Canadian and Western European culture, suffers from a problem. History is not something from which lessons are learned. History is just entertainment, something that makes a good film or book. The way history is treated and taught in schools, from what I have been told, makes history boring. It is just dates, names, and things that happened. I guess the best example is economic history. What did your culture learn from the Depression? How is that knowledge shown today in policies that do not seem to recognize how important social programs and a sense of community are in looking after the needs of all of us? I would like to think that Inuit learn from their history, and because there has been so much change in our recent history, there is a lot to be learned.

Today I am traditional and yet modern; I lived and saw the end of the traditional way of life and the beginning of the modern technological age. In these years of change, I have come to realize the Inuit way of life is disappearing and that my Inuitness is becoming more Europeanized or ‘southernized’ as we say in the North. Our struggle is to protect values and ways of thinking that are different from those of Southerners but that have a lot to offer to a world suffering from environmental, social, and political pain.

My fellow Inuit and I went from the iglu to microwaves in less than 40 years; this is where I want to start. Inuit, as the last traditional hunting society in the Northern Hemisphere, were a very adaptable people and we felt good about it. We all know that there is no going back to the old way of doing things.

In the “other” days, Inuit *tapiriingniq* (teamwork) was most important to our survival. Families, related in some way, would live together to help each other in all manner of activities; be it harvesting, traveling or companionship. From the time I was a little boy, my father always used to direct my brother-in-law and me to go out and collect the caribou meat that he caught a few days before; we stayed together as an extended family so that we could work in *tapiriit* (teams). He used to say that together we were stronger.

Relatives’ and friends’ relationships were very important for the survival of the family. We had many age-old practices that dictated how we should share food and how different members of the group would interact together to ensure that we would live together harmoniously. We had elders and shamans who held the respect of the members of the group and passed down the directives and practices for the group. I am not saying that everything from the past was perfect or even right but it was our way. Most importantly, we knew how to work together and to respect differences.

From what I can remember, cooperation of both the husband and wife was always extremely important. Both of my parents knew their roles and followed them carefully. My father’s responsibility was to be the boss of hunting and fishing. He was responsible for his dog team, and the tools that we needed to survive. As a knowledgeable hunter he was always seeing to our family’s safety, and he knew where the animals were, most of the time. He knew the dangers of the land and knew how to forecast weather. He was also a very spiritual

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person; he truly believed in his culture. Because he was a good hunter he always shared food and helped his community. He taught me many things, expecting me to learn by observation and by practice. He taught me that violence against women was not acceptable. He knew how to communicate his wisdom and knowledge to other people. He was a role model for both men and women.

On the other hand, my mother, as many mothers were, was the boss of the iglu and tent. Besides being the seamstress and cook, she had the authority to bring up all her children. To me, my mother was everything in life! She was a “family doctor” and “family counselor.” When I got sick as a young boy, she knew just how to talk to me and get me thinking that I was not sick. Like my father, she was very humorous and knew how to make us laugh. She was generous and very considerate of others. She used to say, “be particularly kind to those who have just lost one of their parents. Be respectful.” I had a strong attachment to my mother.

My family, as I was growing up, included my parents, my sister (16 years older than me), her husband, and my little brother. We learned about how partnerships work in the family. My brother-in-law and I were taught about the ways of hunting and to be completely connected to the land that we walked on. No matter how old we got, our parents were our bosses for life, and you know, at that time it worked well.

Sharing and patience and survival went together in the past. It was not hard for members of the family or groups of families to learn how important these qualities were because those who did not practice or develop these qualities could be at risk for surviving.

A practice that existed in the past was *Nalunaijainiq*. When two people had conflicts, they used to talk, find solutions, and move forward to become friends again. To resolve issues between people was essential in the past because of how much we depended upon each other for survival. Today we seem to have abdicated this conflict-solving ability to the by-law officers, the RCMP, and the courts. We are frustrated that the formal, legal system does not help us to overcome the problem and become friends again. It creates divisions and problems in our communities. In the past Inuit knew that they had to forgive and move on after conflict had occurred. In the past it was easy for Inuit to forgive.

Today we must identify the strengths in our ‘Inuitness’ and find ways to integrate the strengths into our present-day lives. We must be proud of who we are and where we came from; we must be strong enough to accept the challenges of today as we accepted the challenges of the past. Today we are called upon to move away from our families and communities for education or employment, but remember, we were always adventurous and independent. We can take our families in our hearts and use their strengths to build our new lives. If our families did not give us strength and guidance then we were always adaptable and ingenious—we found ways to learn these skills.

Today we do not always have the strength of our families and relatives around us, so we must find helpers and support from friends, co-workers, church associates or maybe more distant relatives. We must build healthy support groups around us to replace our extended families of the past. We need the support for companionship, language, country food, connections; we need help with bringing up children in today’s world, with the challenges of employment, housing, and doing our taxes. We needed our family in the past and we need them today. Today we may need more helpers because the world we live in is much more complicated, and none of us can be good at everything.

Today we have many challenges to face and maybe the worst of these challenges is that the directives and practices are less well known to ordinary people. We need medical practitioners, counselors, and mechanics; we need food, clothing, and furniture stores; we need educators of all descriptions just to make it through an average day. We must put some trust in all of these people to provide us with the services that we require, but we will know little about them and yet have to trust them for the part of our lives that they help us with. They cannot know us the way our families did in the past, so their advice has to be tempered with who we are and where we come from. No longer are the rules simple and known by all. Today we do our best and hope that all will work out.

We all need housing. Today some of us own our houses, some of us rent from employers or privately and some of us rent from various housing associations. Most Inuit live in social housing. Some of us live as guests in others’ houses for a few days or weeks, or we are forced to live in tents, shacks or cabins because we do not qualify for housing of our own. In the end Nunavut does not have enough housing for all who need it, and this situation increases the stress that we live under. Using the Inuit way of looking at these challenges, we have to make the best of what we have and find the strength to improve our situation as much as possible.

Perhaps the opportunity is today, while our Nunavut is still very young, to give more responsibilities to men, women, and young people alike. Just like her ancestors, my mother was the keeper of the *qulliq* light; Miriam Aglukkaq lit the *qulliq* earlier today to symbolize the authority and responsibility of women.

Family connectedness is an Inuit trait. Perhaps the time has come to have men and women work together for the betterment of our communities and for the survival of our families. We must be imaginative, innovative, and courageous to make this happen. We must have more determination, honesty, and trust to make sure that we give men and women more responsibilities and thereby encourage them to provide leadership. Perhaps this is where we should re-introduce to the political system the idea of a two-member constituency in Nunavut, the idea that you need one woman and one man in each constituency to provide the balanced leadership required to direct the legislature. Together, men and women, we are stronger!

Finally, we need to protect and make use of our way of understanding ourselves in relation to nature. We have accomplished some of this. The new Wildlife Act says that wildlife is to be treated with respect. We are a part of nature. We have a relationship, the same one we have always had, with land and sea animals and all other living things. Nature is not a resource to be exploited so we can become bigger and more important. Nature—the land—is our home. With nature we have a relationship just like the relationships between people that I have described.

We must be proud to be Inuit! We must encourage our children to know about our culture and share this pride. Healthy communities can come only from healthy individuals, and we all have to work to that end. This interrelationship has always been true of Inuit culture, and must continue for the sake of our children and grandchildren.