



Ilarion Merculieff was born on the Pribilof Island of St. Paul, raised in a traditional Aleut community, and given the traditional name *Kuuyux* by an Elder. At the age of four, he was chosen by the Elders to serve as a bridge between traditional Aleut culture and the outside world. He graduated from the University of Washington, having established the first indigenous student education program there. Ilarion has served Aleut and other indigenous peoples over a thirty-five year career devoted to the environment, human rights, community wellness, economic development, and cultural enhancement. He has held leadership positions with a wide range of organizations, including the Aleut Corporation,

the Alaska Inter-Tribal Council, the Alaska Native Science Commission, and the Alaska Department of Commerce and Economic Development. Organizations he co-founded and/or co-directed include the Indigenous Peoples' Council for Marine Mammals, the Alaska Oceans Network, the International Bering Sea Forum, the Bering Sea Council of Elders, and the Science Working Group for Snowchange.

The Way of the Real Human Being

Ilarion Merculieff

One day when I was about five years old, I went out with my grandfather before sunrise to pray near the shore of the Bering Sea. It was an incredibly beautiful day, magical, with sunshine and no wind. As we walked home along the beach, our feet fell into a slow rhythmic pace along the dark-colored sands. Small waves crested in rapid succession. We could hear the seagulls calling and the seals bellowing in a distant rookery. The sea air smelled fresh, and everything was alive and intense. The sky and sea were expansive and a myriad of blue hues. I could see the horizon for a hundred and eighty degrees.

"Oh I love this day!" I proclaimed. "It is really good!"

"*Anaan eestahnaan Laikaiyax*," my grandfather said softly. "*Tututhaax*."

Even as a five-year-old child I understood what he was saying. He was teaching me how to be a real human being through one of the age-old ways that Unungan (Aleut) people have used to survive and thrive along the Bering Sea for ten thousand years. He was saying that words are unnecessary, that they diminish the fullness of meaningful human experience. He was telling me to stop talking and to experience the world around me without words.

St. Paul Island, where I was born and raised, is one of five islands in the archipelago known as the Pribilofs. It is a magical and mystical place, a windswept outpost of volcanic rock twelve miles long and five miles wide, in the middle of the Bering Sea, about 300 air miles west of the mainland of Alaska and 800 miles from Anchorage. My people—the Aleut people—have lived in and along the Bering Sea for ten thousand years, and we live there still. In my childhood, St. Paul was home to some 1.4 million fur seals, 2.5 million seabirds, a thousand reindeer, an untold number of arctic foxes, and six hundred Aleut people, including those in our sister village of St. George, about forty miles away by boat.

I was blessed to have a fully traditional upbringing, by which I mean I was raised by my entire village in the ways of the real human being. I was always welcomed into everyone's home and treated as if I were a member of the family. I was never scolded for anything and had the freedom to roam the island anytime day or night without restriction. Basically, I was free to explore my world inside and out without interference by adults. Of course, none of this would have been possible without the agreement of my parents. Most children in the village were raised this way.

Between the ages of four and six, I lived with Papa (my grandfather, Paul Mercurieff) twenty-four hours a day, as was the custom at that time. I went to work with him, hunted with him, prayed with him, slept with him. This is a tradition that goes a long ways back. It was a way for my grandfather to get to know me and for me to get to know my grandfather.

At the same age, I was invited into many circles within the village. The Elders would invite me to go camping with them, and I would hear their stories. The men would take me out hunting and fishing. The women would take me berry-picking and later invite me to be with them while they prepared and cooked our wild foods. The villagers were my teachers. They taught me what they did, and they shared what they knew.

I found my *Aachaa*^{*} at the age of five. An *Aachaa* relationship develops between an older person and a child based on energetic and spiritual connections rather than family ties. *Aachaa* relationships are not proscribed or planned; they just happen. When that feeling of special connection occurs, the two become *aachaas* and call each other "*Aachaa*."

The word can't begin to encapsulate the relationship. Attempts to define it only diminish it. But for the next eight years of my childhood, my *Aachaa* took me under his wing. He took me out hunting and fishing with him. We hunted Steller sea lions, eider ducks, and whatever other migratory ducks came through. We fished for halibut. The men in my village were consummate hunters and fishers.

From him, through our experiences together, I learned much of what I know about relationship and reciprocity, the Aleut ethics and values of sharing, my relationship to myself and the natural world, and what it means to be an Aleut and a man.

The whole time he had me under his wing, my *Aachaa* spoke no more than about two hundred words to me. He gave no verbal instructions or explanations; he did not encourage me to ask questions. We were together in silence most of the time. He expected me to watch, listen, and learn on my own, using my inherent intelligence.

This is typical of our people. Words are not only superfluous, but they also constrain our intelligence. Adults never presumed any limitation to my intelligence or ability to learn, nor tried to tell me what I should learn. Instead, they provided learning opportunities. The adult's responsibility was simply to create a big open space in which the young one can learn.

* A traditional mentor, pronounced "ah-cha"

The beauty and deep wisdom of that kind of learning is that it allowed me to reach my maximum potential. What I learned depended totally upon my own interests, initiative, experiences, interpretations, discernment, and intelligence. Western-cultured adults often begin with fixed ideas about what children should and should not know. They teach to that presumed and predetermined standard of knowledge, sometimes at the expense of the child's creativity, sense of self, and natural ability to learn on his or her own.

By contrast, nothing was held back from me. Anything I wanted to do, learn, or know, I could, without concern about my age. The only times adults intervened were for reasons of safety. The elders would gauge their responses by the questions I asked. They would answer at a level I could understand.

In Western culture, we are taught to give the "right" answers, or at least try to. And the "right" answers, conveniently, are what they told you they are, things you have to learn by rote. That's a reverse from the way I was raised. None of the things I learned about being Aleut came from books, and there were no wrong answers, only better or different ones. The Aleut learning process helped me to think creatively and critically, without judgment...something that has helped me immensely in my life and career.

Aleut people know that human intelligence exists and operates not simply in the mind but in the body and spirit as well. We learn with all of our senses: hearing, feeling, smelling, intuition, gut responses, thinking, emotions, "heart sense," and body signals. Intelligence is a system, synthesizing information from both sensory and non-sensory inputs. Underneath is a knowing which is profoundly connected to All That Is. Ultimately, this is the basis for our spirituality. The way of a real human being is to understand and feel this connection.

Pribilof Aleuts are People of the Sea Lion. Steller sea lions are as central to our way of life as bowheads are to the Inupiat and bison were to the Plains Indians. They have provided for us through good and hard times. In return, we preserve their habitat from disruption and protect them from wanton killing. We honor each one we kill by eating or using every possible part of the body and sharing the animal with as many families as possible.

As young hunters, we would sit on volcanic basalt boulders next to the sea for six, seven, even ten hours at a stretch, waiting for a sea lion to come by. We learned to be quiet inside and out and to pay attention to everything going on around us. Conversation was a distraction we could not afford. It might prevent us from sensing the sea lion out in the water, five or even ten miles away.

I sat in silence with my *Aachaa* and the other hunters for hours. I watched the sea, listening to the waves and feeling the rhythm of the ocean. Sheww, sheww, sheww. Our island is called the Birthplace of the Winds. I listened to the rhythm of the winds. I listened to the seals barking along the beach. I breathed deeply in the fresh sea air. The sun might shine through the clouds. Everything around me would be moving. Everything would be alive.

Sometimes, I let the rhythm of the wind and the waves and sounds of boisterous seals lull me into a serene stupor. The background of sound in a wild environment is full of rhythm and redundancy; it can easily carry you away into a dreamlike state. Once in a while I might even doze off, having been up since three in the morning to be at the shore by six for a full day of hunting that typically lasted late into the afternoon. After all I was only five years old.

But I noticed that the men never once dozed off or fell into daydreaming. Their awareness never slipped for a second. And then suddenly, a hunter would proclaim, "*Cowax ukukohx!*" A sea lion is coming!

Instantly, without anyone pointing, all the men would look to the same spot out in the open Bering Sea. Uncannily, the hunters would know a sea lion was coming even before anyone could physically see it. To a child my age, this seemed truly magical.

I came to understand it through an experience that at first might seem unrelated. About six miles from my village is a place called Tolstoi where tens of thousands of sea birds nest on cliff ledges of rugged volcanic rock and raise their young on outcrops overlooking the sea. There are many different kinds of birds filling many different niches. Puffins have burrows near the top of the cliff. Kittiwakes make nests of tundra grass on the main body. Murres lay their eggs on the bare rock. Cormorants prefer the promontories sticking out from edges of the cliff face. Auklets nest in crevices underneath basalt boulders at the base.

Beginning at age six, I made regular trips to Tolstoi, leaving the village in the late night darkness so that I could be at the cliff side before sunrise when the seabirds stirred. I would later learn names for their forage: sand lance, tiny sea creatures called *copepods*, and oil-rich fish such as herring, capelin, and pollock. But at this age, I just loved the experience of them.

Near sunrise, birds began to slip off the cliff ledges and circle around in front of the dark volcanic basalt cliffs. Soon, thousands of birds would be flying in every direction in loops around the face of the cliff, passing just inches over my head as I sat below. The murres flew quickly; kittiwakes were slower. The air was filled with the sound of thousands of fluttering wings and bird calls. They were rich and happy sounds, and I loved them.

I watched the birds maneuver around each other, repeatedly landing and taking off from the tiniest of ledges. With my child's mind, I marveled at how thousands of birds could fly up-down, right-left, down-up, left-right, and diagonally, all at the same time without any bird hitting another or even clipping a wing. How did they do this? I wondered. It looks like chaos, but they never even clip a wing.

From this expanse of deep observation, I asked myself a question. What made them different from me? I could think of several things right away. They don't use words or thoughts. They don't worry about tomorrow. They don't think about yesterday. They are full of life and intensely present in the moment. And somehow they know where all the others are too.

I thought about the hunters, who were never lulled as I was. Like the birds, a good hunter has to be fully present at all times, experiencing the rhythms without being lulled to sleep by them. This quality of awareness makes the hunter more successful. With it, there is a better chance he will get the sea lion, and a better chance he will not cause undue suffering when he kills it.

In my child's mind I decided to be like the birds. I had been doing it all along as I watched them, taking in their movements without interference of thought, just like they did. And now my grandfather's teaching about experiencing the world without words came suddenly and clearly to life for me.

It is logically impossible to put into words an experience that goes beyond words; such are the limits of language. In the wordless state, one becomes nothing but pure awareness, not attached to anything, not even thought. As soon as I go into my head I get lulled again, in much the same way as I was once lulled into a stupor after hours on the rocks. But whenever I can be without thought and in awareness, my experience is enhanced and new dimensions of human capability are opened to me.

As my awareness deepened I, too, learned to stay fully alert out on the rocks, to feel the sea lion before I could see it. More consistently, I could feel a halibut before it hit my jig fishing line. I could tell how the fish was hooked (by the lip, jaw, or torso); I could determine size and

weight; frequently, I would be able to tell if it was male or female. That kind of inner knowing is inexplicable by empirical standards, but it is nevertheless quite real. It is a mark of manhood to me and my people.

Inupiat, Yup'ik, Sugpiaq, Dene, Unungan... these are all different code names for the real people, real human beings, or people. Virtually every indigenous culture in Alaska refers to itself as *the people*, or *the human beings* or *the real human beings*. Real human beings are those who are profoundly connected, in spirit and with themselves. They are individuals who feel they are part of a whole and not separated.

You can recognize real human beings by how they inhabit their bodies. Real human qualities include patience, gentleness, soft-spokenness, observation, consideration for people and wildlife, cooperation, non-aggression, the ability to be present in the moment, and a deep reverence and respect for all living things. In Western-dominated cultures, these qualities are often associated with the feminine and dismissed as somehow of lesser or even negative worth in the fight for survival. In the Aleut worldview, however, they are the mark of a true person and a complete human being.

The way of the real human being is a proven pathway to living in long-term sustainable ways on our shared land. It can—and should—help us all deal more successfully with the daunting issues facing humankind.

Ways of a Real Human Being

Listen

Experience the world without words

Revere all life

Respect all others

Affirm all others

Observe closely

Feel the connection to All That Is