

# *Dancing with Owl Feathers*

*A Teacher's Reflections from Rural Alaska*

**Brad Cole**



## **Dedication:**

**To the memory of Calvin Teganlakla**

**and**

**To my many friends,**

**the Yupik Eskimos of Emmonak, Alaska,**

**who gave me the name, “Atrilnguq”**

**(means “no name” or “ring finger“).**

**These essays have appeared previously in the *Tundra Drums* newspaper.**

**All essays and photographs by Brad Cole.**

**White Wolf Press, Evergreen Printing, Everett, WA**

**Copyright by Brad Cole, June 2006**

## *The First Eskimo Dance*

My vacant eyes followed the rolls of steam crawling through the air above me as I sprawled out on the wooden pallet of a floor, physically exhausted from having endured the burning heat of the sauna. The fiery steam struck like angry dogs lashing out against my reddening skin. But now lying down in the washroom I could rest and let my mind drift off like the floating curls of steam and perhaps, in the process find a more centered and deliberate way of becoming buried within myself. That was why I came to the sauna, to wash away the old self that clung like a worn out shirt to my life and hopefully reclaim one more polished and true. Especially on this Friday, for Potlatch would be in the evening and I was to do my first Eskimo dance.

Lying on the cold, wet floor still too weak to stand, my mind raced back to the dance rehearsals. I remembered the small one-room building surrounded by snow machines and snowball throwing children. Sitting under the starry sky the building quickly filled with fur clad Elders and their relatives. Outside you could hear the drums beating, like the sound of an awakening heart. Inside people sat shoulder to shoulder while others began dancing as one, much as their long past kin did when they were alive. As an outsider, a first year teacher at the school in Emmonak, Alaska, I felt welcomed at the dance rehearsals. One could feel it becoming a place for the attending families to find closeness to their ancestral spirits.

It was a cold and windy night that arrived that evening, along with a large number of people from outside of the village. I saw many of them unloading piles of gifts from the worn sleds attached to their snow-machines and then they stumped through the dense snow and gathered indoors to celebrate the Potlatch. There were more frosty faces in the parka buried crowd than blackfish mingling beneath a frozen slough.

Hearing the beginning beat of the drums and the soft chanting, the dancers rose up from the floor and moved in front of the audience and clustered as closely together as possible, like caribou preparing to cross a windy river. Holding on to numerous snow owl feathered and caribou whiskered fans the dancers began circling their arms in shared, time-honored movements.

The drums spoke out in such a loud and rhythmic call to the surrounding universe I feared the tundra spirits may become excited, perhaps even too much, and come crashing through the wooden roof of the old Complex at any moment.

Soon I was introduced to the solemn looking audience and my Eskimo name was announced, “Atrilnguq”, meaning “no name”. Grabbing a dance fan made for the occasion, I together with others began the dance that I had rehearsed so many times. I could feel my spirit stretching inside of me, struggling to see and understand the occasion in a Yupik way.

It was late when I left the Complex and the celebration was still going on. The sound of the drums and images of sealskin clothed children dancing together continued in my mind as I walked out onto a cold and windy tundra. I was hoping the fresh air and exercise would give me a break from the excitement of the dance and help me fall to asleep. Following a snow machine trail through the willows and over a couple of sloughs I finally hiked out on to the bank of a small lake. On the opposite shore an orange full moon was rising up from the flat snowy horizon. A storm was blowing in toward the village from the east. While standing there I thought again about the dance and the snow owl feathers on my dance fan. An idea was stirring up slowly inside of me, trying to take shape. The wind barreled down from the night sky and for a moment my cheeks felt like they were on fire. On rare occasions I could feel the ghost of my grandmother in the wind and I wondered how close she was to me during the dance. But I did not feel any spirit on that night, the night of my new name, “no name”. Only the glow of a full moon was staring down at me from the cold sky. I stood there in the snow waiting for it to fall into my spiritually haunted and somewhat vacant, but now strangely feathered soul.



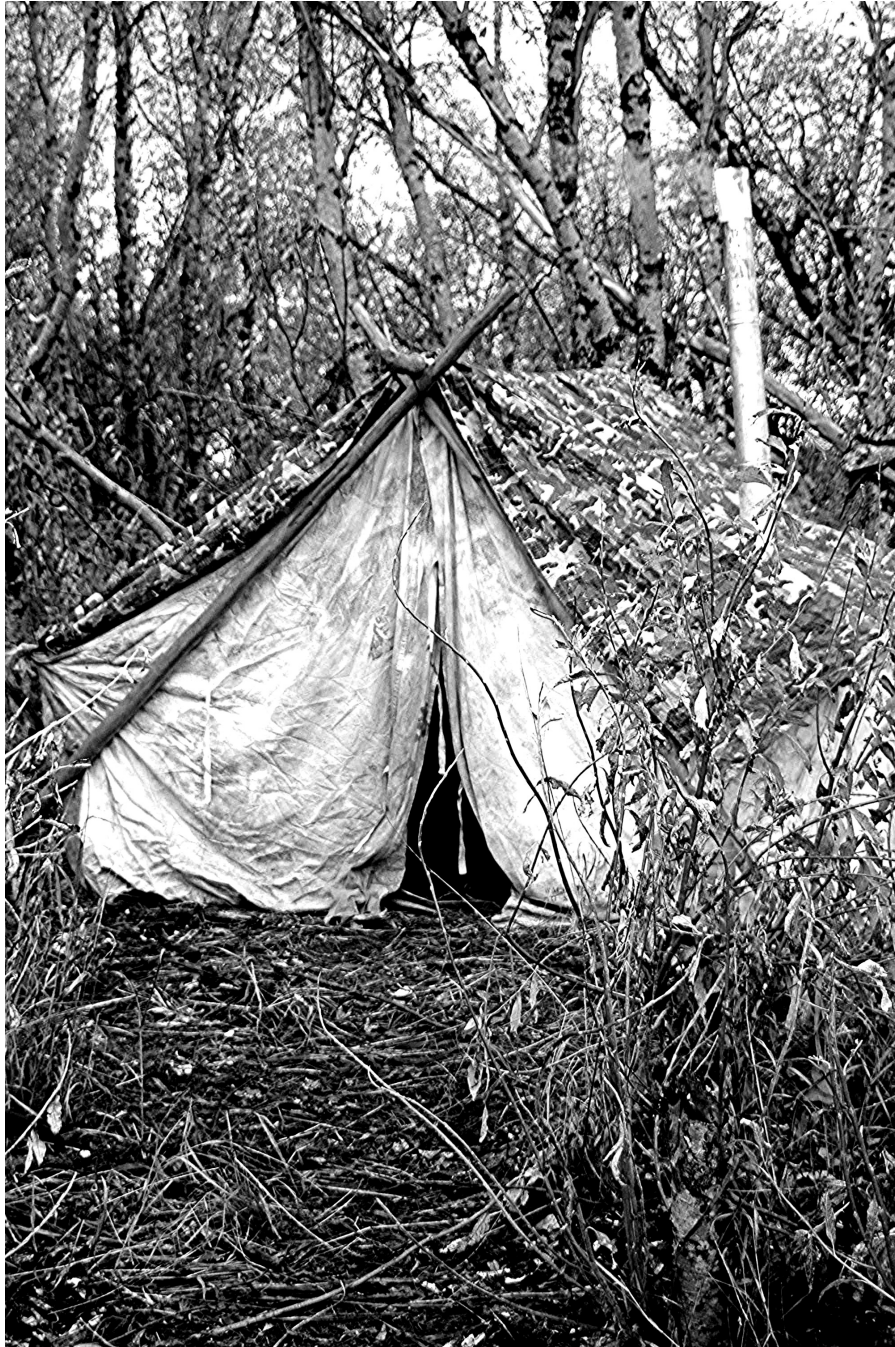
## *Listening for Moose*

The cool, twilight sky had turned the few but robust looking clouds that were drifting overhead a bright reddish-pink, I saw while walking away with my rifle from a small, smoky camp. I wanted to find a quiet, restful spot to stand along the bank of a nameless branch of the Yukon River and listen for passing game. After being called a moose and shot at with homemade arrows several times by a small band of boys, I decided it was time to leave.

Walking a quarter mile until the bank turned steep, I stopped and laid the rifle against my side and relaxed just standing there. My eyes could not escape the late evening light reflecting so beautifully across the playful surface of the calm river. The salmon colored sky had a peacefulness that seemed to reach out to infinity, I felt while hearing the melancholy call of a distant loon. Soon afterwards a small flock of geese could be heard squawking overhead and then the sharp splash of a busy beaver somewhere in the distant dark, working its broad tail on the lazy brown waters.

Standing quietly still, listening intently for the slightest of sounds coming from the trees, I knew that I had not come just for the hunt, but rather to experience the untamed richness of nature. The moose was a four legged miracle of the wild that I wanted to hunt down and bring back as a gift from the tundra to my family, believing it would somehow help make their lives more whole. I felt that I needed to work with and feed from this ancient wilderness so my spirit could learn how to grow more real.

Taking a deep breath I looked down at my wet, muddy boots, while listening to the far-away cackle of more birds, perhaps swans, passing through the darkening sky. Perhaps my wife was right, I thought. By running off to play with guns at camp with my hunting buddies I was only following some crazy male instinct. Whatever she said, I could not get over the feeling that I was doing what nature had always wanted me to be doing: trying to become a noble human being. I was struggling in my own way, searching through my many experiences in the wilderness, always wanting to learn more about becoming a strong, true, and good person.



Unfortunately, it was probably something she will never understand.

The evening darkness was now almost complete as I felt the growing chill of the night air. A breeze had started running, following the river, possibly blowing toward the coast. I could still hear an occasional shout from the boys and the sound of an arrow piercing the river's surface, or was it fish jumping? I decided to wait for them to bed down in the tent before returning to camp.

I shuffled my feet to ease some discomfort while standing in the tall moist grass of the muddy bank. Moose can sometimes be heard scrapping their antlers against the willow trees, but doubted I would hear much tonight. But with patience I should bag one this season. It was then a clear, vivid thought came to my mind while watching the invading darkness engulfing the colors of the once twilight waves. Another loon called out from somewhere, far off in the night. I stood there thinking about how we struggle to find our truths in life through the things we love.

Finally, I gave up on the hunt and returned to the tent for a nights sleep; but not without a youthful pillow fight first.

## *Fish Netting: Gifts from the Wild*

“Pull up some net. I’m going to push the boat away from the bank,” Billy said while stepping carefully around me and then he headed toward the stern.

I had been standing silently in the middle of the 18 foot metal craft watching the wind blow against the willows. It was growing stronger with the approaching dark clouds, while a pair of ravens circled above, playing with the wind.

Once Billy left I stepped forward to where the fish net was draped and dripping across the bow of the boat. Beginning at the bank we had stripped the net clean of fish and we were now working our way along it toward the end, which was marked by a float out in the middle of the slough.

Just then another gust of wind hit my head and threatened to flip off my cap. I watched as it rolled across the water and then into the far bank that was thick with leafless willows. The ripples on the water flowed like cat scratches fanning out across the slough’s surface. After the whirling sound of the wind from the trees faded I heard only the sleepy whispers of waves slapping softly on the nearby mud-hardened bank.

I looked down at the net as it fell from the edge of the boat and into the dark depths of the water. There a salmon, two pikes, and three white fish all squirmed in the dripping wet mesh. Looking at it farther out along the line, a float bobbed suddenly underwater and then bounced back to the surface; it was wriggling up and down as though gasping for air.

Leaning slightly over the side of the boat I pulled up hard on the soaked, fish filled net. Flipping and twitching about a couple of fish struggled in the air to free themselves from the entrapping web. Bending forward again I pulled with my whole upper body and this time was able to drop the fresh catch into the boat where the fish flopped about like rain soaked leaves in the wind.

I kneeled down and was about to grab and push the fish through the net and toss them into the large plastic container when from the stern Billy shouted, “Just wait a minute, I’m almost done.”

So I sat up on the edge of the boat and watched the fish wrestling with the net. I thought about their bodies moving like the wind, flashing fiercely but beautifully through the dark, cold waters of the river, their eyes bright with life.

I remembered how important fish were to the lives of people in the villages and their deep love for the vast, windy Yukon River. Perhaps it is only through the of purity love that our spirit can journey outwards, touch and discover the spirits that dwell in this wild, arctic landscape. Maybe this was the only way to become strong and secure in a world with a hungry, animal-like darkness, I thought.

Again the wind slammed past me and curled into the distant willows where the trees tossed brutally like the flapping net that was holding the fish struggling to be free. I looked down and thought of how these silvery creatures had followed the river only to find our trap. It was like the way the wind finds the willows, filling them easily with its fast and fierce beauty. There was so much richness in nature's subtle but eternal web of life and death, I thought.

Later that day in the boat ride back to Emmonak, the Yukon River was smooth and the setting sun reflected colorfully off of its calm surface. I felt as though I was passing through a dream. Remembering the afternoon netting on the slough, I imagined a dream of fish flowing into the darkened web of my soul, giving me the strength and wisdom needed to journey through even the most desolate, windy of arctic nights with a heart of love.

## *A Cabin Sanctuary*

It was becoming late in the evening and I had just laid down a novel that I was reading and began lowering the flame in a small gas lantern when a sudden, hard gust of wind pounced on my old log cabin, as though telling me that it was about to rip off the roof. A rainstorm had been howling outdoors for most of the day, tossing waves of water down from the sky; while sitting indoors I was worried of a large tree limb falling and crushing the cabin roof or breaking a window.

Emotionally fried from my first nine months of teaching in Emmonak, in rural Alaska, I decided to return to my old cabin for a much needed rest. Being near the Olympic National Park, in the state of Washington, there were steep mountains and lush forests for hiking and I enjoyed swimming in the cold swift waters of the Sol Duc River. I found the quiet solitude of nature to be a healthy experience and that it can invigorate a soul exhausted by the busy and burning world.

A quick scampering sound came from a darkened corner and I looked but did not see the mouse that I knew was there. But in the same corner, the aged portrait of my father as a young man, wearing his World War II Army uniform, now stood crooked on a small shelf. This summer I was only a visitor to the cabin, while it was the mice that lived there, I thought.

Needing to stand up and stretch, I decided to grab a flashlight and gather more wood for the stove to help take the cold edge off the growing night air. I stepped outside to a wide porch that was used for chopping and storing firewood and I stood there momentarily to watch the surrounding fir trees dance under the brutal slaps of wind and rain. My weak light stretched out feebly only a few yards into the belly of the grizzly storm. I thought of listening carefully to the thrashing jaws of the wind and the creaking moans of the trees; that way I could better know the full force of the evening's tempest, but I decided that gathering firewood would be more important.

I had just turned around and was about to grab an armful of wood from the back of the porch when I heard an owl calling out. There were a few short bursts of "whoot-hoo" and then the only sound was the wind and rain tearing through trees. Turning again

I walked back to the front of the porch and looked out into the night, but only the storm tossed shapes of the forest could be seen.

An unexpected feeling of intense mystery, or perhaps awe, struck me. I began to feel that the forest was a place where an ancient past still had a living presence; that it was like a sanctuary for bold but needful spirits. Feeling the rain falling against my face and still looking outwardly, I began to think that I was peering into the blurry waters of a fast moving mountain stream, searching for any signs of color or life. It was so dark and mysterious that I wondered if I could sense the presence of ancestral spirits standing silently among the tall trees; spirits that were like the dry, rustling leaves, that fall and disappear into the thick shadows of forest. Perhaps they were watching and waiting to help us through the darkness of our lives. Perhaps the richness they experience in nature is the closest they can come to our thin and transparent world, since they are not ready to leave their own twilight lands. Like the owl, perhaps I came to the forest seeking their quiet wisdom.

But as abruptly as it came to me the feeling of mystery left and only the emptiness of the wind and rain remained. I stepped back into the dimly light cabin and decided to go to bed. Feeling tired from a long day of stormy weather I turned off the gas lantern and light a candle that I carried into the bedroom. The small crisp flame threw out sharp flickering shadows on the log walls as I entered and sat down on the bed. I could still hear the pounding rain falling tirelessly on the thin roof above me and I thought about the dark forest that surrounded the tiny cabin. Leaning forward over my knees I said a quiet prayer. Then I blew out the candle and fell into a deep sleep and dreamed about strange shadows stepping silently beneath the bold but wind fallen leaves of the forest.

## *An Owl in the Woods*

(Thoughts on Turning Fifty)

What comes most to mind was how quiet the woods were in the night. The wind felt almost sweet as I would stand on the trail and strain with every inch in my body to connect to and touch it. Sometimes I would hear the Great Horned Owl that lived there and when I saw it on rare occasions (the wings were so large among the trees) it was such a thrill. This I remember well, looking back at my years of youth, trying to understand what my life has accomplished now that I am turning fifty.

The woods were in the hills behind the college where I was studying for a Bachelor's degree in Art. For some reason I preferred begin alone during those years; but it was a loneliness that made my mind painfully unhealthy. I grew up seeing nature in such a pure light that I felt people and society were dirty; even now I still have some of those feelings in me.

I worked and studied hard on my drawings and paintings, trying to transform vision into art, spirit into substance, perhaps with only limited success. Everyday I would walk about a mile from my family's home, in a small town in North Dakota, to the college and back again, perhaps two or three times, putting a lot of miles on my hiking boots. By walking so much I felt my connection with nature would remain strong and build spirit in me. This is how I grew up.

My parents were always in the distant background of my life. Working on my art classes and the few friends that I had were the center of my attention. But I had a deep love for my grandmother, even though she had little presence in my life and died while I was in college. I always felt that her spirit was drawn into nature; that perhaps through nature my love for her would find its connection. While I was young and even now at this age, I find myself needing not so much a wife or a girlfriend, but rather a "spirit mother". I can do fairly well without women but to try to live without a genuine sense of a caring spirit watching over me, I become crushed and feel horribly lost.

The feeling of abandonment was intense during my years of youth and even now I can feel it sometimes, but not as sharply. Youth can give up hope so easily when they are uncertain of their future. But there were times alone out on the prairie hills near my



home when I felt that I belonged there, that God still cared and would not forsake me, no matter how the pages of my life turned.

So what are my accomplishments? Has my life been worth it? I am not a parent, so that is one I can not claim. But there is a love in my heart that has been at the center of my life and it has made me what I am today. I listen to it carefully for it may sometimes contain the voice for God. Because our visions are often weak, we must learn how to listen well to the world in which we live. I feel good about being fifty years old and being close to nature has taught me more than the classes in college. Sometimes, when remembering my youth, I still think of God as being like an owl in the woods.



## *Let Nature Teach*

The loud whirling screech of a snow machine accelerating, skimming across fresh pools of overflow tore the air up and down the windy wilderness of the Yukon River. It must be a springtime hunter in search of birds, foxes, and rabbits, I thought, while standing on the snowy bank and watching the rider disappear into the icy distance. Spring was arriving quickly this year because of a week of high temperatures. Grass and soil was already appearing from beneath the withdrawing winter snow and instead of walking in thick insulated boots, I now wore thin rubber ones.

It had been a good winter, I thought while still standing there looking at the shimmering pools of water scattered about on the river ice. My mind wandered back to the past few months. I was remembering willows clothed in snow and the long cold, colorful twilight in which two bright stars would always appear, one in the east and the other glowing in the west.

The spirit of the North has a stark but mysterious beauty in winter. On clear nights a vast gathering of stars would bath the sky in a celestial radiance giving the snow a bluish luster that sparkles magically in the night. The light of the moon and stars drifted through the clouds with the glow of a thousand different whirling spirits, while also shining enough light on the tundra to help me easily find my way. The tundra night has a subtle shimmer, a curious light that comes as much from the snow as from the glowing universe within the sky.

My hikes after dark across the frozen sloughs, lakes and under branching willows were full of wonder and beauty that was strengthened by a sense of intimacy with the land. An intimacy born from the willowy wind and the frozen earth; an intimacy that gives so much life, helping me see these walks as a way to spend time studying with one of the greatest teachers: the natural landscape of our lives.

But the winter landscape could also be a harsh and unforgiving one, I thought while seeing another snow-machine racing, splashing through the melt-water and rushing up river. It was following the far bank hoping to avoid the large pools of water. The bluish spots were stands of fresh water while the slushy brown areas were sand bars thawing out. This made me think of the ice and all of its dangers, being one of the many

dangers that can teach, hopefully, us how to live wisely.

I turned away from the windy river and started walking down the dirt road back to the village of Emmonak. I remembered that as a first year teacher in the unfamiliar wilderness of Alaska, without any friends or family, I felt like I had fallen off the edge of the earth. I was a stranger in a strange land. But meeting the cheerful kids at school, the frost-bitten men in the sauna and the colorful Eskimo dancers, it was their kindness that assured me that warm hearts lived here. Living and being challenged on foreign soil taught me much about humanity. It taught me about the nature of the journey we call life, a journey that struggles to teach us how to grow as real human beings.

The swirling arctic night sky with its mythic constellations also became a teacher during my snowy walks. Perhaps it was the stars in Orion that taught me how truth comes from within, from the discoveries we experience in our soulful journeys, discoveries we can unexpectedly make when we feel lost, alone and in the dark.

To let nature become your teacher requires a brave, strong and steady soul. There is a wild and clever spirit living in the land, one that is so difficult to understand. But to learn how to boldly face this god-driven beast is to grow as a human being. This alone is a worth the painful struggles of living. Just as learning how to teach another human being about the mysterious nature of life is one of the greatest of all virtues.

## *A Eulogy for Mom*

A mild morning breeze blew through the open window pushing the silk curtain playfully. It brought into the darkened bedroom the sound of summer birds and the smell of fresh flowers. I leaned over the sleeping form of my mother and squeezed her shoulder. When she awoke her eyes still blazed with the same pretty blue color of her youth. She was 87 years old and in the late stages of Alzheimer's, living in my home where my wife and I were caring for her. When she turned her head on the pillow to look at me I doubted she saw her son. Just to see a smile I tweaked the tip of her nose playfully with my fingertip. She smirked, opened her eyes widely and gave me a look of bewilderment.

"Time to get up and have some breakfast," I said. But there still was little response from her, she had not spoken for nearly a year.

Straining both arms and back I pulled her gently up and out of the bed. I made sure her feet were firmly planted on the floor before walking arm in arm to the bathroom.

I remembered one special moment the week before when she gave me a strangely intense look, staring straight at me, her eyes very bright. I could of sworn she had momentarily recognized me and suddenly felt a motherly bond. That somehow she wanted me to know that she still knew me but could not express it. But this feeling of connection quickly disappeared, leaving my mother once again to become strangely lost inside the lifeboat of her body.

After getting her cleaned up in the bathroom I sat her down at the kitchen table. My wife had prepared breakfast and started spoon feeding Mom. With the progressing Alzheimer's it had become increasing difficult for her to swallow and she developed an instinctive fear of choking. This combined with a weak heart lead to the heart attack that the paramedics said ended her life on that morning.

A couple of days later I began to think of how she gave me life, loved and guided and supported me through so much of my uneasy existence. Perhaps now, I thought, in her death she is waiting to give me something equally, if not more precious: her spirit. A spirit that will continue to love and guide me through the darkness of life and, hopefully, grant me wisdom.

So now when I feel the warm breeze of summer and hear the sharp chirp of small birds, I pause to admire the endless sky above me and think of the wide awake blue eyes of my mother.



Florence Cole, 1918-2005

## *A Feather in the Net*

It was a windy, rainy Saturday afternoon as I was walking along the bank of the Yukon, downriver from Emmonak looking for a place to possibly set up a camp. It may come in handy during the winter months when I was blackfish trapping, or snaring beavers and rabbits, I thought.

The sky was a deep wooly blue and a light to sometimes heavy rain was falling into the darkness of the surrounding willows. The air felt cool and fresh against my face, while the walking was wet, it still was enjoyable. Thoughts about the unexpected passing away of my mother earlier in the summer darted through my mind like fish inside a windy river, but the rain seemed to soften this feeling of loss.

After walking about half an hour I arrived at and began to look over a piece of land that the tribe thought might suit me and it really did seem nice. Its low sloping bank had a lot of mud and grass, but in winter this would not matter. Standing there and looking at the willows and the river, they all seemed to blend together in the rain soaked light of the late summer afternoon. Facing the cool breeze, it would be a peaceful place, I felt. The four-wheeler trail that I followed from the village was good. It may encourage kids and vandalism, but I was not planning on storing anything of real value there.

Seeing a silver smokehouse in the tall grass, a little farther downriver, I walked over to it. The metal building had a loose sheet of aluminum flapping and banging in the moist wind. A large fishnet was blowing like a silk curtain clinging to a log shelter and a couple of dry fish were still hanging inside, leftovers from the summer's harvest.

Then I saw a small bird caught in the net. Though it was not a robin, it had the colors of one. It was deeply entangled in the thick green netting and sensing my presence it became frantic with fear and started flapping ferociously about.

I started to untangle it, but seeing how it fought my every move and feeling frustrated about how horribly stuck it was, I thought maybe of killing it – to put it out of its misery. There were feathers clinging to the rain soaked net, having been pulled out from its long struggle. But deciding I had plenty of time and I should do what I could to help the poor bird. Despite it poking and trying to bite my fingers, I wrestled with the netting, struggling to pull it off. Just as the bird was nearly free it flapped its wings

wildly and flew back into the net, getting caught up again.

Finally, I got it loose and holding carefully in both hands so it would not fly back into the net, I released it and the bird flew straight, disappearing into the thick wet willows.

On the way back thoughts of my mother's death once again darted through my mind. Then I thought about the bird in the net, of how it quickly vanished into the willows. It must have been so happy to have escaped the dreadful net. I wondered if my mother found a similar sense of release, of becoming free from this dark and windy world in which we live. For Heaven is among the stars, right? Perhaps, someday my soul will learn how to become free from physical, worldly bonds and fly away to be at one with the loving spirit of my mother. Only my body will be left behind, like a feather in the net.



## *The Lessons of Elders*

The large white owl leaped out of the willows and flapped its great arching wings and soared across the snow covered slough, disappearing behind the willows. It was late in the afternoon in March and a star had just arrived in the western sky to signal the end of day. I had spooked the owl while walking along a snow machine trail. It was the largest owl I had ever seen, I thought to myself, while continuing on with my trek through the snow, wanting to reach the point where the willows closed in on the slough, leaving no bank on which to walk. There I would be forced to turn around and hike back the way I came.

A soft breeze shuffled down the waterway from the south, bringing with it mild winter warmth. Getting outdoors and seeing the beauty of wild animals enhances the way we understand nature and possibly ourselves, I thought, while continuing the deep snowy hike.

Having reached the impassable willows I stood there watching the cloud speckled sky and became lost in thought. Wild animals give nature a soul and a meaning that go beyond the practical concerns of our everyday lives. Perhaps it was this spirit in nature that helps us to dwell more deeply and to better know ourselves, I pondered as I turned and started my way back, carefully placing each footstep in the previously made track and returned toward the mouth of the slough that lazily opened out to the Yukon River.

Stopping for a moment to look at the still distant river, I remembered my first feeling of centering, of connecting to an inner self, when walking into my grandmother's apartment as a child. Her furniture was old and antiques cluttered the small living room that contained a dark colored couch. It felt like a place far removed from the busily progressing world. Memories and ancient connections to things past hung on her walls in photographs and small tapestries. There was so much meaning in those keepsakes and other objects that she could never abandon. The room embraced so many memories and emotions that as a child I could never understand. Only the feeling of love came across in that small apartment and it fed my youthful but slowly growing spirit. I learned about becoming a whole person then, without even knowing it, by looking into the eyes of my grandmother, much the same way as I do now by



watching a raven glide across the willows.

Elders are so important in the lives of children I continued to think, while walking into the mouth of the slough, seeing the frozen Yukon River stretch endless miles to the east and west. Elders can draw the out the richness in the lives of their children and help them to see the world more clearly. Experience and elders are the greatest of teachers. As a teacher in Emmonak I focus on reading, writing and math. But Elders can teach the children how to move wisely out into the sprawling universe that lies beyond our day and night, up and down, crazy, hungry world. They can teach them how to live deeply and grow rich with relationships.

Walking off of the icy river and back toward the road I saw animal tracks that I had missed earlier. The ever present fox tracks danced across the powdery snow, winding their way in and out of the willows, circling their way across the tundra like a half crazed, restless spirit. A raven glided overhead with its stout black wings barely flapping, cawing out “gree-muk”, “gree-muk”. It must be mistaking me for someone else, I thought, while climbing up a small hill of deep snow and hurrying back to the village.

## *Thoughts of Family in Winter*

“Pull slowly on that net. I don’t want it to get tore up,” I said softly to the two parka bundled teenage boys, knowing there was no real danger of the net getting damaged. It was only a reminder for them to be careful. They were holding on to and walking together away from the ice hole, pulling my forty foot net slowly out of the river.

I was standing on the frozen Yukon River near Alukanuk, Alaska, with two of my friend’s sons. They had never seen an under ice fish net, so I decided to take them to check mine. With the recent cold temperatures I did not expect to find many fish in it. It seems not many fish run the river during January.

While standing there on the open river with the boys, I thought how strange it was to see such a brilliant, full moon at 11AM on a Saturday morning. It was a beautiful sight. The bright yellow-orange ball was slowly rising up in the west, out of a dense and wide band of blended violets, blues and purples that stretched across the whole horizon. The sun had just risen in the east and while working on the ice it was hard to not notice such a striking sight as the rising moon.

“Keep walking until the net is all the way out,” I said. Standing in crusty windswept snow and ice the two boys were still holding on to the rope and I was watching the long, wet net emerge from beneath the ice. No fish could yet be seen in its thick webbing.

Hearing a loud squawk, I looked up to see a raven flying over head watching us, hoping we would leave food behind. I wondered if it was the same one I saw earlier while traveling on the snowmachine and that it had followed us. Having been out on the river for nearly an hour I had seen no other signs of life, not even the usual sled travelers between Emmonak and Alukanuk. Downriver the Yukon River opened to the Bering Sea and it looked endlessly flat and frozen, a featureless place safe for only wandering spirits. Fortunately, we could easily follow the northern bank of the river when returning to Emmonak.

With the cold wind blowing hard we turned our backs on it to not freeze exposed cheeks and noses, which often get frostbitten. While standing there looking at the white icy



Calvin and Jason Teganlakla playing on the frozen Yukon River.

emptiness of the river I felt myself falling into the wind. It was as though the wind had begun to carry me away downriver toward the barren sea. Feeling light headed I turned and walked to the kids to get my balance back. Most of the net had been pulled out and three silvery mid-sized fish had just appeared from the small hole, tangled up in the net.

“Stop. Let me get those fish,” I spoke quickly and then grabbed and twisted the fish from the net and threw them into a plastic bag that was ballooning in the wind.

The boys were doing well, I thought. Even with the cold they had not complained. Then there came to me an old familiar feeling of regret, of not having any of my own children. Children and family are at the very heart of life, I thought. Looking still at the young boys, I wondered if nature has a love that seeks to grow in and through our lives. Perhaps only to reassure myself, I imagined a family of spirits encircling our world with a quiet embrace.

The full moon had risen out of the haze on the horizon and it still looked beautiful floating up into the western sky. Like a grandmother sitting alone, it seemed to be watching us from there.

“Lets hurry up and get this net pulled back so we can go,” I said. My face felt raw and my toes were numb and I knew the boys felt much the same.

I quickly untied and wrapped up the extra rope, packed away the shovel and ice pick and warmed up the snowmachine. We rubbed our fingers and faces one last time and I threw out a small fish for the raven circling overhead, and finally we started up the long, windy river for home.

## *The Christmas Deer*

It was about a week before Christmas and I was looking out my classroom window after all the students had left for the day. Feeling tired I turned around and began picking paperwork off the tables. Suddenly a large flurry of snow began falling; I could see it swirling in the thick willows just outside my window. Then a cluster of small white birds flew into the twisted, snow-filled branches and they were seen playing, tumbling about the trees like children having fun.

I stopped picking up the papers and watched the birds for awhile. Seeing the snow deeply piling up, I began to wonder about the coming winter months, about how the cold darkness of every winter holds a challenge for us. As a teacher I see the kids struggling to grow up and learning to find a well centered, deliberate way of living. Hopefully, their labors will bring them to a truthful and loving life. Listening is such an important part of this soulful search. Listen carefully to the wind in the willows and one can hear the story of your life, I thought fancifully, while still holding a pile of papers.

The large flakes of snow continued to fall and swirl and my eyes were captivated by watching them tumble through the cold sky and dance about the dark willows. The small birds seemed to be enjoying it too. It brought back memories of a story my grandma told me when I was young. It was about a time when she was a child and a heavy snow fell on her family's farm in North Dakota only about a week before Christmas. The family was low on food, but then one of the children saw a deer which was exhausted, struggling in the deep snow. It was in a field nearby looking like it could no longer walk. When the child told his father, the man picked up an old hunting rifle, walked out into the windy field and shot it. For Christmas day the family invited friends and relatives to their small white farmhouse for the biggest and best feast grandma remembered having in those days. She especially remembered a feeling of thankfulness that all the people seemed to share. I could see it in her eyes that she would never forget the good fortune brought by what we later called the, "Christmas Deer".

Still feeling tired at the end of the day I sat down for a minute. Watching the steady snow falling outdoors, I wondered how much good I was doing, trying to teach the important lessons in life, like having a strong heart that was willing to sacrifice for love and family, and the feeling of thankfulness that should come from this. Perhaps, before

her death, grandma wondered if the young would ever learn to be thankful for the way God gives so much through nature, serving to enrich our lives. Like Christmas, our relationship with nature should build in us a strong moral bearing, I thought. It should help us find the Christmas deer in each and every one of us, feeding and strengthening our spirits and that of our families and communities.

The birds were soon gone and only snow filled the branching willows. I finished picking up student papers, put my coat on to leave the classroom and walked out the door, turning out the light. I felt so drained from a day of teaching and as I started for my house a cold wind seemed to cling to my face. Once again, I only wanted to go home to eat, rest and sleep for the night. Perhaps, later a dream will come to me, I wondered, a dream of small white birds flying playfully in a snowy wind. The wind would have the sound that only a lost worn out soul could make, one wandering the willows in search of Christmas.



## *A River of Winter Dreams*

I turned off the snowmachine and stepped away from it while looking up the Yukon River toward the end of the sandbar. The falling snow had thickened into large, moist flakes and the cold wind could be felt more sharply now compared to half hour earlier when I left Emmonak. I barely saw the trees just beyond the sandbar's point. A large raven leaped from the nearby willows winging silently between the snow covered trees and then it disappeared into a sky swirling with white flakes.

I had come to the sandbar searching for twelve foot poles to set up my wall tent. Having purchased a large wood stove, I wanted to try it for a night before sub zero temperatures came and gripped the land.

The snow was a foot deep and only faint mounds outlined where logs may be buried. A cluster of small birds with white bellies and brown and black wings were playing mischievously in the bushes nearby. Numerous barren plants showing only hollow but tough brown colored stems stood on the frozen ground, their heads capped with snow.

Stepping carefully not to twist an ankle on a hidden log, I walked around kicking and scrapping away the white powdery mounds of frozen frost looking for light weight and straight logs for my tent. I knew that with time I was sure to find what I needed.

The winter sun hung low on the western horizon downriver from the sandbar. Its bright orange disk blazed through a momentary opening in the gray ceiling of sky. Being chased by a strong wind the dense clouds past quickly. Seeing how frozen and quiet the river had become I stood silently for a moment to feel what winter with its icy claws had brought to the land. The wind whistled across the tundra like a busy caretaker and the snow was covering everything like a blanket tossed on a sleeping child. A raven floated above me in the wind moving only slightly up and down with stretched out wings. Like the snow covered willows and the frozen river, the raven looked as though it was giving itself generously to the winter winds. I suddenly felt the painful burden of my life and the need for quiet sleep. It was a desire to let go of my existence, to become fully free by having my spirit slip away into the wind and snow and belong only to the enchanted landscape of the sleeping arctic tundra. I thought bitterly, why must I struggle hard to

protect a life that I feel so uncertain about, like a worn-out animal building its own trap? The wind in the willows whistled again and I turned to listen, knowing the answer could only be found in the buried stillness of my soul.

After an hour of searching the snow covered sandbar I had dug and pulled out three good poles and had sawed one down to the length I wanted. I knew that I would find the others I needed, but they would remain buried until I returned on another day.

The small glaring light of a distant snowmachine could be seen on the frozen river and I looked toward the sun to see it settling into night. The snow was still falling heavily so I decided to return home and tied the three long poles to the rear of my snowmachine. A large raven floated overhead only to disappear into the snowy sky. I thought of the winding trail back to the village and was looking forward to a long night of quiet sleep; a sleep where my spirit might slip away and follow a silvery river that sparkles with snow in the moonlight. I would call it a river of winter dreams.





## *The Garden of Our Mind*

The sky was wetter than a wash rag and the green grass of the backyard was soaked with last night's rain. But having the short damp blades of grass weed their way between my toes as I walked across the lawn felt good. I always liked walking barefoot in the grass. The small yard was ringed by a series of flower beds and a tall wood fence that gave the place a feeling of privacy. Two large birch trees were swaying in the far corner of the yard and I could hear a couple of sparrows playing among its leafy branches. The sound of their chirping gave life to the cool morning breeze, a refreshing one that was stirring my still slumbering body back to life.

Standing in the middle of the yard, I stretched my body to the left and right hoping to shake off the stiffness of sleep. A quiet sadness was felt curling around my heart. I had spent three years teaching in Emmonak, making friends and building relationships only to have left it in May to return to Seattle. I felt sad also for the many parents and other members of the community who tried so hard to keep me in their village, but the school district refused to listen. They should have been heard because there is a richness of culture and community in rural villages that is so lacking in our cold institutions and the head-strong world of business and politics. Our world that is being consumed by over exploitation. When will modern people learn to slow down, simplify and return to a life balanced with nature, a lesson so well understood by Eskimo elders? When will the rich light of humanity shine through this hungry, shadowy world?

Seeing a favorite yard decoration behind a large leafy plant, I walked up to the back fence. It was a small concrete angel holding a glass ball (or was it a globe?). It was covered with the same beautiful layer of rain water as the rest of the yard. The morning light reflected off the gold colored sphere the way light reflects off water in a bird bath. While standing there I felt that the rain droplets on plants gave the yard a feeling of renewal. That the plants were quietly absorbing its nurturing, life giving properties and swelling outwardly, growing and living as God wished. I could feel a spirit of unity, a healing wholeness within that small peaceful place and it was feeding off the soft light of day. This light seemed to deepen my reflection and feeling of



reverence, almost to the point of prayer. But I am easily humbled by nature, I thought.

The sound of more cars passing outside the wood fence brought me back to reality. They were people driving off to begin work. As a teacher it was nice to have a long summer break, I felt. It was a good way to spend as much time outdoors with nature as possible. Summer was my time of renewal.

A hint of rain was felt on a passing breeze as I stood there, reminding me of the mornings weather. It will probably rain for the next couple of days, I thought. Deciding to take one more short walk around the yard and then go back to the house, I turned around. Inside a small bush I saw a small white flower. It was bouncing in the light wind and still carrying a bundle of rain drops on its petals from the night before. Only the darkness of the earth laid behind its bright star-like shape. It will probably last through the coming week and then fade away. But a million textbooks could be written and studied at school about it and still not capture its soul, its essence, I thought. The spirit of this flower can only be seen by educating ones heart and cultivating the mind and through this vision a kingdom will be seen showing how we and our communities belong to nature. Like rain drops returning to the sea, through spirit we will find our destinies and salvation.

The mornings light was dimming with the thickening of clouds and rain. The wind became stronger suggesting that a heavy downpour was about to begin. A feeling of melancholy was still lodged in my heart so I decided to stay indoors for the day. I had some forms to fill out for the new school district that I was starting in the fall, plus I had been out the day before hiking in the Cascade mountains.

Just as I was entering the house and sliding the glass door shut behind me I saw the playful sparrows emerge from the tall birch tree and fly to a nearby bird bath where they started to splash about in the water. Life was so simple for them, I thought. Then looking up at the dark clouds I wondered if the weather will ever wash humanity clean? The answer lies somewhere in the rain soaked garden of our minds, I felt, and then closed the door.

## *Epilogue: Thoughts on Education*

The longer I stay in the villages of Alaska the more I believe in the importance education plays in the health and well being of our communities. But the way schools are being operated is sadly different from the way they should be. Unfortunately, many parents feel this way too and become coldly distant from their children's education and the local school. They feel that the school is not a welcome place for them to be. That it is only a place where a student's work is important and individual needs (much less their spirit) becomes lost in the crowd (or should I say class). The need for conformity rules the life of our schools. But it should be the need for a healthy community that drives them and not just the need for people to make money. Our children should not be growing up just seeing dollar signs, but it seems like they are.

The role of school should be as an extension of family life, not separate from it. The local school board should be supervising the schools as the guardians of the interest and investment and power of the parents in the well being of their children. Church, city and other organizations should also be advising local school boards about education in community or townhall meetings.

It is truly ridiculous the way school districts listen and obey the politicians of state and federal government and ignore the parents and communities of school children. Especially when federal law states that all children have the right to a "free and appropriate education". This means that the government, by law, has to provide an education to its people that will help them learn how to better take care of themselves. It does not mean that schools should only teach its children how to work quietly and make money, which would be unfair in villages with little paying jobs. Those who decide what is an "appropriate education" need to be the parents working with their own community leaders, not the politicians in Washington DC and their business buddies. A reflection of the heart and soul of a community (and its health) can be seen in its children and the quality of their education.

The role of the Regional School Board, I believe, is to listen to the Local School Boards and then the RSBs should respond appropriately by directing the Superintendent in a manner consistent with the concerns they are hearing from the villages. The

Superintendent can use his professional knowledge and experience from dealing with other schools in the district to help advise the local school boards on how best to manage their own schools. But the local school boards should have the democratic power to run their own schools (to hire, fire personnel, decide on what and how the children should be learning). This is the only way to bring parents back in the schools. They need to feel like they have not only a voice but also a degree of authority in their children's education.

The best way to establish a healthy sense of community is by having the older children teach to the younger ones, but it should be supervised by knowledgeable adults. By getting them to feel like real teachers the older youths will learn how to respect themselves better and take pride in their own families and community. This will also teach them the value of community, which is people helping people.

The children need to feel that their education is coming from their own parents and communities, not strangers from the outside. This will help them to feel a greater sense of "belonging" to family and community and assist them to grow with a strong sense of who they are. It should help them to grow up with a sense of personal vision so they can lead their own communities well into the future and strengthen their own collective destinies.

## *Biography*

Brad Cole was born and raised in Valley City, North Dakota. He graduated from Valley City State College with a Bachelors Degree in Art and afterwards served in the US Army and retired in 1991. Brad has been working for ten years as a special education teacher with the last seven years being in rural, western Alaska. He is currently spending his summers in Everett, Washington and the school year in Alaska. To contact him email: [brad032255@gmail.com](mailto:brad032255@gmail.com).

