



THE RICHES THAT ARE POSSIBLE

*THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY
IN ONE NATIVE EXPERIENCE*

Sarah Anala

My name is Sarah Anala, an Inuk (singular of Inuit), born on the North Coast Labrador.

The spiritual journey in my Native experience begins with the earliest recall of my childhood in which my father instilled in me that I was a special gift bestowed upon an humble father and mother by our Creator. It was not a lesson to be taught or to be learned, *it was a way of life.*

Share with me as I retrace the Path of Peace of my youth.



I was born shortly before Newfoundland and Labrador joined Confederation, so I remember the tail-end of the nomadic way of life, where life was in harmony with the seasons of the year. My parents taught me to live on the land, with the land, for the land, and of the land. I can sense the feeling and the smells of the seasons changing as if it happened yesterday. In the present rush-rush world, this offers me much inner peace and contentment when I call upon it in meditation.

It is springtime; the little sub-arctic flowers, just a short while ago blanketed in the melting snow, are in magnificent bloom. The season is short so they have to share their beauty in a hurry. They seem to shout for one's appreciation in their abundance and array of colours. The cloudless blue of the sky mirrors its opulence on the azure blue of the sea.

We have awakened with the dawn; our family is motoring out to the island to harvest the wild birds' eggs. My father tells me that we only take what we need, for Nature has to continue with the sustenance of life. There is hardly a ripple on the calm surface of the sea; we are one with the ocean and the islands. On the way, we kill a seal for food and for its pelt, from which my mother will make boots. Nothing of it is wasted; even the insides will be used to feed our dogs. Upon landing the seal, my father asks his pre-school daughter, "Pannii, do you know how many hairs are on that seal?" I answer, "Yes, I do..." and begin to count. To this my father replies, "No, you don't, Pannii, but our Creator does."

Although during most of my younger life our family's livelihood was the cod-fishery in the summertime, I will share with you one particular summer which is etched in my memory of the early 1950s.

The short summer arrives with all its majesty. Our family has now a diesel boat upon which my father has built a sleeping cabin

and has rigged the rudder so that I can manoeuvre it, should the need arise. We are going north to Hebron to try out the Arctic char fishery. The sea is calm and serene, but, within the blink of an eye, it may dwarf our little boat when the wind rises and the ocean's waves become mountains of surging water. If a storm arises, none of us will be shrouded or gripped by fear. We are never afraid of the elements of the land, for with the Creator there is no fear.

The splendour of the fiords, the glacial beds, and the sheer mountains is breathtaking, and our humble boat is dwarfed to a minuscule. To a wee child, where does the art of Nature begin and end, where does the path of man begin and end? It doesn't; you are one with the other and the Peace is easily understood.

We have reached Hebron and now we are on our way to Saglek Fiord, but we are told that the ice floes and packs are still very thick. My father, having been raised along this particular coast of Northern Labrador, decides that we will give it a try. He is regarded as a wise man and spiritual leader; no one questions his decision. He voices to us that, should a difficulty arise, the Creator has made many havens of rest along the way. We reach the moving ice floes and, sure enough, the ice-pans are thick, but we keep the Faith. There is one man at the bow of the boat, a second man at the engine and a third man at the helm, who is my father. The engine-man misunderstands the pilot and we surge forward faster than expected. This causes the ice to bore a hole at the bottom of our boat, approximately a foot in diameter. No panic; my father orders the boat to a stop, cuts the top of his hip rubber boot, and temporarily repairs it until we can reach shore. As all this occurs, I have my exercise book and pencil and I draw the scenery around us.

As our little boat meanders along the deep fiords, the grandeur upon which my eyes feast is forever engraved on the black-board of my memory. As farther north we go, the treeline becomes but a memory. As we view the sunset on the last of the trees, where only willows and alders dare to leaf above the permafrost, my father once again asks me, "Pannii, do you know how many trees are upon that mountainside?" "Yes, I do..." Again the calm and gentle reply is, "No, you don't, but our Creator does." We feel no intimidation or threat from the awesomeness of nature. Father says the Creator always provides, but it is up to us to make use of His Givings. With this simple attitude, we have a very productive summer. To this day, I can still feel the Peace between Earth and

Man. On the way back to Nain, my father takes the extra time and goes the extra distance to show me the land where he had been born in 1888, *Okak*.

Once again the fall has come upon us as quickly as the long winter had disappeared. The sun sets sooner than it had over the summer, which had been as late as 10:30 pm. We have gone farther inland into the bays surrounding Nain. As we wind our way along the bays, the hillsides are beckoning us with their glorious abundance of partridge-berries, blueberries, and blackberries, and the marshy areas are profuse with bake-apples. We will pick enough to last us until the midwinter. Our Creator supplies us with all our needs and we give thanks for His Kindness. My mother and father diligently gather enough Arctic char and trout to sunbake dry to last us most of the winter. My mother hand-sews sealskin boots to keep us warm and dry. My father chops wood until dark to give us heat until the harbours and bays freeze over. After the freeze-up, he will transport the remainder by dog-team. Each season has its offerings. Although we do not have the affluent material wealth of this culture, we are rich with the supplies of Creation. We have no need to pursue what is contained in the pages of the Simpson-Sears catalogue; we have plenty, thank you.

The winter has descended upon us. The harbour freezes over within a flash of a second, it seems. We are now farther up the bay at the fur-bearing grounds. Even though the temperature can fall to 46 degrees below zero plus the wind-chill factor, in the daytime the rays of the sun are intense. My father has gone chopping wood for our home in Nain; my mother has bannock in the frypan and she has gone to fetch water. I awaken and open the flap of our tent; the heat has awakened me. Out I come with my bannock and a drink of milk, not fresh Baxter's milk, mind you, but canned milk and water. The jay is chattering for my bread, so we have breakfast together. We are not inhibited by the surface of feathers and surface of skin. We are playmates knowing no difference, only that it is fun to share. I have no uneasiness with the Wild of Nature, for I am told that we were each created a creature by the same Creator. Also at this time, my parents will harvest the fur-bearing animals along their trap-line. These they will trade at the Government Store for basic staples such as flour, sugar, butter, tea and dried apricots, apples and prunes. When my father returns at dusk, which is now 4 p.m., my bedtime story after supper is verbal, sure and certain.

Our Creator made the sparrows, chickadees, warblers, juncoes, same as He created me, and because he is the Master Weaver of us all, He loves them just as He loves me.

I will now share with you a story of Faith and Trust which happened the winter I started school. The daughter treads to school on crisp, crunchy snow; the father contentedly repairs his cod-traps in the bright rays of the life-giving sun and the mother pursues her task of fishing through the ice. The sun mirrors its glory on magnificent, snow-covered mountains. It is an unassuming, uncluttered and simple way of Inuit life.

The ensuing hours harbour within them a near-tragedy. In the mid-afternoon, seemingly out of nowhere, arrives a punishing snowstorm. The windy blizzard howls and whistles as it swirls the fresh-fallen snow in all directions; visibility is reduced to an arm's-length. The knell of the little Moravian Church bell beckons the return of the mother and wife, a tradition then to summon the lost. She is young, for she was only born in 1913. Shotguns blast from the foothills to encourage the wandering to follow the echoes for a safe return. As I look out of the hoarfrost-covered windows, I admire the intricate designs upon the glass. My father's words are uninhibited and sure, "Your mother will be guided home, so don't you fret, Pannii."

It is now bedtime, the bell has ceased ringing and the guns have retreated to their hunting purposes, and a little girl quietly thanks the Creator for mother.

The time has come again when the spring is fast approaching. The Government Store is beginning to run low on some of its winter supply; this was not always the case but there have been winters when things were getting lean. My father was very astute and frugal, therefore our family never ran out. A poorer family arrives at our door; my father tells my mother if we have two loaves of bread left, to give one, for we will be richly blessed. My mother goes to the porch and returns with an armload of dried fish and dried meat. The visiting father cannot pay but, if he can help to paint our boat in the spring, that will suffice, he is told.

Months later, he comes to help with our boat. Our Inuit word is our word of honour.

The nomadic way of life is now getting too strenuous for my father, so the same boat which took us to Saglek Fiord will now

take us to Happy Valley-Goose Bay in Central Labrador, where my parents will try their hand at wage-earning.

We arrive there in the early fall and by the time the snow flies we will be in our home, built from scratch. As we depart from our Northern home, my father's advice to me is, "Pannii, things are not always going to be the same upon the Labrador. There are changes coming, sure and certain. You must get your education. Whatever you may choose to do in life, whatever you may do, Pannii, don't ever forget your culture and heritage, and don't ever lose your mother tongue." To this day, I savour the feeling upon his lap as he imparted those words. That day I made a mental vow to uphold that request. The way he held my little round face in the palm of his hand and gently looked into my eyes, we both knew that I would keep those words true. As a result, to this day I am fluent in spoken and written Inuktittut, Labrador dialect. My father's physical being left this earth when I was eleven. But I know there must be a tamarack tree or Labrador spruce upon the earth where he rests. His Spirit has not died, for the morals and values that he taught me are within my daughter today. My mother went to their fishing and trapping grounds to be with my father when I was seventeen and in my second year of nurses' training in St. John's, Newfoundland. I know also that her Spirit lives on, for I find myself resorting to her tremendous sense of humour.



When I first arrived in this culture, I often felt acutely strapped in, inhibited by the expectations of decorum and mannerism, the norms and mores of this culture. It was as if I were caged in and dictated to as to how to behave and how to act instead of the free-flowing spirit in which I was brought up. During the course of learning to live in this culture, I ran into problems with alcohol. For eight seemingly never-ending years, I lived the opposite way of my upbringing. At the end of those years, the guilt of living the opposite way of my father's teachings became too unbearable so I made a conscious decision. As of March, 1991, I have been sober and alcohol-free for thirteen years. That decision has made it possible that my nine-year-old daughter Heidi speaks of her "Grandfather, the fisherman" as if she knew him, and she does: for in her lives the appreciation and the unfathomed curiosity of all living things. This past week, we identified a male and

female hooded yellow warblers. We found some tamarack trees at the Narrows, which she had seen in Labrador in 1988.

My going back to attitudes of Spirituality has enabled us to become involved in the Native community in New Brunswick. I am delighted with this because it gives Heidi the opportunity to appreciate and live our culture and heritage even though miles separate us from the Labrador.

The Spirit, emotions and feelings know no time or distance; it is only the intellect tells one of time and distance. Heidi and I can be in the woods and smell a fragrance or experience a feeling, and I will tell her a comforting story from my childhood relating to that particular scent or feeling. The sense of togetherness is absolutely inexplicable. Here, there is no need of explanation, for we have come together to celebrate the riches that are possible of Spirituality.

It was springtime, Heidi was nearing three years old. I was at the kitchen sink when her little footsteps came clobbering across the floor in her rubber boots. Mud lay across the floor behind her. Little hand outstretched, filled with weeds and wildflowers of all descriptions, new words being enunciated for the first time, "Momma, I have some pretty flowers for you!" The feeling which came across me as the bunch of growth went from her hand to my hand was a Spiritual Awakening itself.

The following verifies within me that the compassion of my father Nikalaus is nurtured within Heidi. When Heidi was four years old, my best friend's father was brutally beaten to death. Each time someone came to our door, Heidi's little recount would be "My Mom has been crying. My Mom is very sad. Another daddy died in Labrador." About this time, if I was crying in loneliness for home and things of home, she would always bring me her "sukkie blanket" to comfort me. This particular day, I had just hung up from comforting my friend. Heidi came hurrying to the kitchen. "Maybe my sukkie will help Rose." With that, I packaged it as was and sent it to my friend. Rose says she's got it hanging on the wall and when Heidi grows up she will give it back to her with the story behind it.

When Heidi was smaller she had a near-accident. There was one lone pine tree amongst a cluster of alders. What stopped her from going over the crag and onto the busy thoroughfare was that lone pine tree. Each spring she would ask to go hug and kiss that tree "because it was put there before she was ever born to save her life."

In 1988, when Heidi was five years old, we had the special privilege of being able to attend my high school class reunion in Labrador. When I was eleven years old, at the time of my father's death, I was allowed to say my last "So long." I wanted to kiss my father's cheek for the last time, but I was too short and nobody thought to come to my aid. He was my Spiritual mentor, my Spiritual educator, and even in sobriety I carried the guilt of not carrying out this last wish. While in Labrador, I took Heidi to the little church where we had worshipped as a family. The minister had been a schoolmate of mine and his wife had been at boarding school with me. I accompanied Heidi to the semicircle, placed diagonally from the altar, for story-time. As we sat together, I slowly but surely realized we were situated in the semicircle exactly where my father's casket had lain. From that moment on, I carry no more guilt. It was a time to share our gratitude with the Spirit of my father and Heidi's "Grandfather, the fisherman."



I will now relate to you another awkward process of growing in this culture. I had the misfortune or good fortune of standing up to Government. For five solid years, I stood up to their impatience, their manners of intimidation and ways of humiliation. Many a time, I cried and felt like running home to Labrador where things are familiar, comforting and non-alienating. With the strength and backing of my family, I hung in there. I won. From that I have learned to stand tall (at 4' 9 1/2") in my belief of honesty and remain true to my convictions. Also from that I have learned to speak out against the wrongs of racism and try to help erase some of the misconceptions that the general public has about the Native people.

When I first came to New Brunswick, some of my people kept asking what I was doing down here wasting myself when I had the ability to be of great help to my Peoples in the North. For quite some time, I felt guilty about living down here and not up home. What broke the blow was that some years ago I had made a decision to try to be happy regardless of where I may hang my hat on this Earth.

Today, I no longer feel guilty; I know I'm where I'm supposed to be. I believe that the path of our mission is laid out long before we are conceived, only it takes longer for some of us to find our course. I may never fully chart my map while I walk upon this

Earth. But each good that I do for another and for this Earth will help to make my map more complete. The more I concentrate on helping the Labrador Inuit inmates in the federal institutions and help to make sure that their road is less bumpy, the less time I have for my pity-parties, as I call the different adversities.

In the last while, I have had to adhere to Spirituality and call upon the hardiness of being a Labradorian. Some time ago, Heidi ran into racism in school. I give thanks for sobriety or else I would never have had the chance to be there for the little being entrusted to our care. My husband, Walter, was severely injured in a fall. We know in our hearts that we endured circumstances where many a man has reached the point of giving up and where the family has disintegrated. When I have wavered, Walter has been my tree swaying in the wind and me hanging on to a branch. Today, we are alive and we give thanks for the adversities which have permitted us to grow in strength. We take two steps forward and one step back but we do our stepping *together* and that has made all the difference.

Today, the gifts which I cherish are not those that one can hold in the palm of the hand or touch with the hand. They are the ones which are treasured in my mind, heart and soul.

Sarah Anala was born in Labrador and grew up in the nomadic way of life of the Inuit people. Now she lives in St. John, New Brunswick, with her husband, Walter, and her daughter, Heidi. Active in the Native community, she is committed to keeping cultural and spiritual traditions alive, and to combatting racism for the common good of aboriginal people. She has also served recently as an interpreter in a federal institution.

This essay is taken from a talk given at the 1991 Northeast Regional Gathering of the Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas. The theme of the Gathering was "Telling the Story of All Creation: The Spiritual Journey in Native Experience."

The cover illustration was drawn by Heidi Anala, age 9. Sarah writes: "It depicts the finned, the wingèd, the wingèd thinking of the four-legged (Heidi's cat), and the drawing done by a two-legged (Heidi)."

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1506 Race Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102 U.S.A.