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A Year in the Woods

By KAREN REED HADALSKI

At 21, I became a VISTA volunteer. My assignment was to teach English and do community development in Alaska's bush country. In 1966, there was no plumbing or electricity, no roads or cars in the Athabascan Indian village of Stony River. Except for one snowmobile, owned by the village chief, the only means of transportation were snowshoes, dog sleds, canoes and outboard motor boats.

There wasn't much to do in my small log cabin, so I spent a lot of time outside. When I sat in silence, taking in the vast arctic sky with stars the size of basketballs and colorful streaks of light flashing and dancing across their lush, black background, I was mesmerized.

I was also overcome by an awareness of how minutely small we are—yet, how special and significant we must be in the mind of our Creator to have been given such an unutterably magnificent world in which to live.

During the day, I often took time to rest, listening to the wind and the wolves howling in the distance; opening myself to the energizing warmth of the midday sun; taking in the astonishing beauty of a dark forest blanketed in crystalline whiteness.

As I just allowed myself to Be, I became aware of a deeper Self that had nothing at all to do with my identity as "Karen." This self seemed more authentic, solid and timeless. It felt grounded and ethereal, at once, making me feel a strong connection to both the world of creation and its Creator. I thought this must be the "soul" I'd heard so much about from ministers and Sunday school teachers but could never locate when I looked in the mirror.

Prayer came to be spontaneous and felt as vital, natural and stimulating as any "in person" conversation I'd ever enjoyed. And, for the first time, I experienced the electric excitement of waiting for and listening to the response to my prayers.

I wondered why the church I was raised in never taught me this, instead of words to memorize, songs to sing and commandments to follow that would get me into Heaven. To my mind, this was Heaven.

When I left Alaska, I embarked upon a serious study of metaphysics and the mystical aspects of world religions. Returning to college, I became an English major and focused on Ralph Waldo Emerson's philosophy of Transcendentalism, English Romanticism, and the strong connection between the internal life of Shakespeare's characters and the natural world in which they lived. I went on to obtain a graduate degree and to teach these subjects for many years.

Living with Athabascan Indians and really getting to know them, despite our cultural differences and language barrier, was another turning point for me.

Relationships I'd participated in up to this point were largely the outcome of being thrown together as relatives, neighbors, classmates or co-workers. We spent most of our time together doing things, going places, having superficial conversations.

Here, time spent in social interaction was used to get to know and understand each other. Because of our language differences, my Alaskan friends and I had to connect and communicate through eye and facial expressions, touch, a kind of "mind reading," and a combination of English, Yuk and sign language.

This intense effort to really "get" one another's meanings and feelings, along with the common experience of surviving a harsh winter, sharing our resources, and teaching and learning from one another, created a stronger connection and bond of affection than I'd ever experienced. At the end of one short year, I felt I had come to know Gusty, Marvera and Ivan far better than many of the friends I grew up with.

This new way of being and connecting with others served me well throughout my life. In addition to inspiring deeper, more intimate friendships, I credit my ability to move easily and comfortably between diverse social stratifications, ethnicities and lifestyles to this experience. The skill of connecting at a core level and communicating from a place of authenticity was of great assistance to me in my work with students from various socio-economic backgrounds, as a social worker, and as a family literacy coordinator in Philadelphia's most poverty-stricken neighborhoods. Living off the land and being cut off from grocery

stores, clothiers and all modern conveniences gave me a great sense of self-reliance and taught me that it is possible to survive—even thrive—with very little money and very few things.

I came to understand that what is really necessary to living a happy, fulfilling life has nothing at all to do with how much money we make, how many possessions we accumulate or what job title we go by.

My Alaskan neighbors fished in unpolluted rivers and streams; hunted only what was necessary to feed the village; gathered rosehips, berries and other nutritious fruits and seeds; made warm, waterproof, long-lasting clothing and mukluks from the skins and hides of animals; built modest homes, and heated them, from the trees of the forests; and created medicines and poultices from the roots, bark and plants that surrounded them.

The children were educated in life skills necessary to survive in and conserve their environment, the oral tradition of their forefathers, and a spirituality of wonder and personal communication with God. Their parents made their toys, played with them, ate with them and—on very cold nights—slept with them. Families were happy and close, and individuals truly enjoyed and respected each other’s uniqueness.

Somehow, just knowing that it is possible to survive without all of the conveniences and entrapments of modern society has given me a sense of fearlessness and inner security. I can honestly say that I haven’t spent a moment of my life being anxious about not having “enough” or not being able to survive. I’ve also never spent a moment of my life feeling the inner loneliness and emptiness that seems to be an inevitable by-product of today’s fast-moving, impersonal world.

It’s been 40 years since I lived in pre-pipeline Alaska. Yet, the subject still comes up in conversation. When it does, I am usually asked: “Is it really dark 24 hours a day?” (Yes, until it gradually builds up to being light 24 hours.) “How cold did it get?” (30 degrees below zero.) “Did you learn how to handle a dog sled?” (Sort of, and with great difficulty.) “Did you have to use an outhouse?” (Mostly I used a “honey bucket.”) “Do Eskimos really live in igloos?” (Yes, as temporary shelter when on hunting expeditions.) “How did you stay in touch with the outside world?” (I had access to a short-wave radio, and the mail plane came a few times a month.)

It isn’t easy to casually interject into such conversations that the most valuable and surprising gifts I received from this adventure were self-awareness, self-reliance, a new set of values and a more fulfilling way of connecting to and interacting with life.

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