

Tribute from a friend

(Note: August 10 was the 68th birthday of Howard Rock, artist and editor. Howard died on April 20, 1976. This poem records some thoughts of a friend on the occasion.)



*Incredible
how many lives
you touched,
gently, unforgettably.
An artist, first of all,
but so many other things,
to your people and me.
Editor, poet, philosopher,
teacher, and, most of all,
true friend, Howard.
A man, Inupiat!
Alaska Native!
Such a will,
determination
and faith
on a foundation
of solid Rock.
Honest and humble,
stirring the conscience
of a nation.
And such a heart,
soft as ivory or gold.
Friend to so many
lonely men and women
away from home.
Source of pride
and strength.
How many hours, days,
years, you let me sit
at your side?
Hardly a spoken word.
A smile, or frown,
and I learned
and understood.
Such an education
you gave!
Quietly, softly, gently.
By example.
I haven't felt you
near lately,
like when you visited
a few times,
late at night,
to look over my shoulder.
It's not like
we don't need you
anymore, you know?*

*Things have changed
since you left.
That soft voice
no longer reassures us,
nurturing spirit
and confidence.
Telling us
of amazing things
done by our people,
encouraging us
to remember these things
in difficult times.
A legacy, an example,
too fine
for commoners
and mere mortals
such as we.
When people speak
of limited abilities
of Native folks,
I ask, "Did you ever
meet Howard?"*

*And they hadn't.
"Oh, Gee! Well! By golly!"
Didn't you add so much
to that list
of amazing things?
Three years gone
and still
I can't write
your obituary.
You taught us
to celebrate life.
Tell me more
about things done
in the old days
and now.
Come near,
just one more time.
And, by the way,
Happy Birthday!
Old Friend, Howard,
Dear Friend!*

— THOMAS RICHARDS, JR.