
Editorial — Challenge of Change

The more things change, the more they stay the same. That axiom may hold true for some folks, but to us it appears as though Alaska Native people are being challenged by times of bewildering and intensive change. Never before have Alaska Natives been required to make so many decisions and accomplish so many tasks. These overwhelming demands appear to be taking their toll on the morale, the health and well-being and the creativity of Alaska Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts.

Many of the tasks which we are now laboring to perform are a result of our own efforts: We are having to build and make work new educational systems because we demanded local control over the education of our children. We are having to design and manage programs to deliver health and social services to our own populations because we demanded self-determination. We are having to wrestle with and make decisions concerning public policy because we have achieved an enviable role in influencing the political process. We deliberate endlessly about business ventures and wage vigorous proxy battles because we have won a place in the corporate world.

Some tasks have been thrust upon us because of circumstances over which we have had little control: Subsistence hunters stand on the sidelines bewildered while environmentalists, developers and sportsmen have heated arguments over the lands which Natives rely upon for their ration of protein. We fight bureaucrats in trying to get title to land already promised us by law. Elders in many villages shake their heads sadly at grave problems which they cannot understand — not even the most peace-

ful, pleasant village is free from the tragic ills of drug and alcohol abuse. Violent crimes, suicides and accidental deaths too frequently disturb the tranquility of our small rural communities.

For whatever reason, Native people are confronted with such a volume of change at this time that our tolerance for such change is severely shaken. Even the confident, aggressive leadership of a decade ago doesn't appear to have an idea of how we may weather the current turmoil.

Our current crop of leaders seem more familiar with dealing with problems that are solved by considering factors such as assets, liabilities, working capital and equity. Such talent is of value and we don't mean to ridicule the corporate leadership. Yet, something is sadly missing. What is it that we can discover to pull us through this period of social disorder and confused values? One piece of advice comes to mind over and over again. A wise, senior statesman, an Alaska Native, was asked what advice he had for young Native people confronted with meeting the challenges of changing times.

And Howard Rock thoughtfully said, "If troublesome obstacles come upon you, think of the achievements of your ancestors. They established cultures that very well met the unkind situations. They won over them and left ample room for fun, arts, and for big shares of lightheartedness."

These words, quietly spoken, ring true for these troubled times: "Your folks in the old days have done some amazing things to meet deadly obstacles, dangers, life and death situations and met them very well indeed. These facts were passed down to us and when they are studied a bit, they can give you a new awakening and spirit, strength to meet difficult situations that might come your way. Believe me, there will be some that will strain your very soul."

Native Alaskans are blessed with a virtue few other peoples have. While we live with one foot in the present, we feel a kinship with our ancestors of a hundred or a thousand years in the past. At the same time, we feel a responsibility to hold in trust our cultural values for those who will come a thousand years after us. To survive the turmoil and confusion of the present age of great change, we, the several living generations of Alaska Natives, might turn to the traditional values in facing the challenge of cultural survival. Generations from now, Alaska Natives must know what it means to be Alaska Native. Otherwise, the land will have been won for nothing, and the dividend checks will have little meaning for those who receive them.

Perhaps we should not become overly distracted by the many demands on our time and energy and make more time to learn and enjoy the richness and wonder of our cultures. These several living generations of Native people can be the strongest link in our timeless heritage. Then, maybe it can be said that the more things change, the more we can stay the same.

—T.R.j.