

Sharing With Others In Need Is Arctic's Unwritten Law

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The Arctic in its grudging moments can be most cruel. She can be terribly indifferent to life and death struggle that goes on upon her lands and seas. Blinding blizzards can blow for days on end. Gales rage on interminably. Water leads on the sea ice refuse to open. Land animals bypass their accustomed routes.

These conditions, which can last for weeks or even months, fortunately are rare. But when they persist they can become disastrous or near disastrous.

Lean Years

In the early 1929's such a condition existed at the village of Point Hope in Northwestern Alaska. The economy of the natives there had not been good for many, many years previous to that date. This was due to poor whaling "takes" in those years probably springing from the drastic reduction of the bowhead whale herd as a result of the massive hunt for them by fleets of whaling ships during the latter part of the 1800's.

When weather improved, hunters of Point Hope went out but came back empty handed. Now and then a seal would be caught. The meager catches were not enough to sustain the economy of the village. Food supplies became lower and lower day by day. Rationing of food was the order of the day. Some families began to go hungry.

Danger Zone

Many hunters, including my father, would report that far out miles and miles from the village could be seen by telescope, multitudes of seals in open leads but they were beyond the danger zone. To go beyond this danger line was almost suicidal for any hunter. If they did chance it, it was almost certain the ice would break between them and the village and they would be carried out to sea. Many hunters had been lost in the past who tried to go beyond it.

At our house our family began to feel the shortage of food as did other families of the village. Teams of dogs became lean.

The Hunt

One morning, after a meager breakfast, father went hunting. Lately, he had mentioned seeing a great many seals with his telescope.

"There are so many of them they are like a school of tom cod," he told mother.

Mother, knowing that he was toying with the idea of going out there and knowing the risk was great, said to him, "It would be foolhardy for you to go out there. Hunting should improve very shortly."

The time of the year was March. The weather was cold; the temperature was around 30 or 35 below zero.

When father went hunting he, almost always, came home just before dark. At that time each day, mother would ask me or my older sister to go out to see if father was approaching. When we saw that he had caught a seal or a polar bear, we would run to him and help him pull the animal home.

The Vigil

That day as evening approached, mother told my sister and I to watch for father. I went out twice and my sister once. Each time we told mother that there still was no sign of father. She took the news casually and without comment.

It was growing dark outside. Mother began to go out herself to scan the north bank. When she came in she told my sister to take care of our little sister who was a year and a half old at the time. The baby had begun to whimper and cry. When she didn't stop mother took her and comforted her. She then put her on the low bunk, nursed her, and tried to make her sleep.

Hidden Anxiety

When the baby fell asleep, mother again went out. Before she left, she told me to tell my uncle and his family that my father had not yet come home. She also told me to notify two other men who were my father's close friends.

When I went out to notify the men, I looked toward our house and saw mother walking toward the north bank, a lonely figure in the dimness of the night.

When I returned home, mother was just back from the bank. "Did you see father?" I asked anxiously. "Nahqa (no) but he will be coming soon," she reassured.

Search Party

The men I had notified came in one by one in succession. One of them asked for a lantern. Two, of them went out on the ice to try to spot father while the man with the lantern went on top of a high pressure ridge and placed the lantern there so father would see it if he was coming home. If father came back the lantern man was to swing the light from side to side signalling father's homecoming.

It was getting far too late now. Tension was growing in our little home. Mother was visibly calm but one could sense the turmoil she was going through. She was now going out more frequently staying long enough in the house to get warm. One of those times she again walked to the north bank and was gone for a lengthy period.

Unexpected Direction

Presently, my sister and I heard a muffled voice outside of the house and we went out. I was the first and when I emerged I could see mother running toward the south. Beyond her was someone coming toward our house. When they came together, they seemed to embrace and then came on toward home in a hurry. I ran toward them. Father had come home!

At the entrance father disengaged the drag line around his shoulders on which was fastened a seal. Mother hurried him into the house. My father kept saying, "They're alright. My feet are alright."

Feet Unharmd

When we entered the house, I saw the reason for my mother's anxiety. Father's mukluks were frozen to the leggings over his knees. They were impossible to pull off. Mother took her sharp ulu (women's knife) and began to slash the mukluks down the sides and took them off. When she pulled the caribou socks off, she was satisfied. Father's feet were in good shape. They were not frozen.

As my mother worked frantically with father's mukluks, I noticed that her eyes were a little swollen and red. She had wept when she heard father calling, "Keshorna - Keshorna, I'm here, I'm home!" The tension and the relief upon father's return had been too great.

My sister and I brought the seal into the house. It was quite frozen but mother started

cutting the skin off at once. My anticipation of sufficient meals was pleasant but I was to be somewhat frustrated with the result of the cutting up of the seal.

Decision

That morning when father left to go hunting, he had made up his mind if conditions seemed right he would make a dash beyond the danger zone to get seals. "I didn't want to see all of you hungry," he volunteered an excuse.

When he reached the edge of the danger zone there was, as usual, no open water. This had been a great disappointment for a long time now for the hunters of the village. Father walked to a lofty pressure ridge, not far away, climbed it and trained his telescope seaward. As he scanned southward he saw a rather small open water with tiny dots of moving objects in it. It was teeming with seals!

He began to worry because the seals' location was about two and a half to three miles out from the cleavage of the danger zone. Nevertheless, he made up his mind to make a dash there. Conditions seemed right. There was hardly any wind but it was cold.

The Dash

He set out toward open water as fast as he could make it. When he reached it at last he was amazed to see dozens of seals swimming in it. He sneaked close to them and quickly shot two. The dead seals floated. He got his heaving line out of his pack sack and hooked the seals in.

He attached them to his drag line and started shoreward at once.

Alarming Sign

As he labored on with all the speed he could make, he noticed a tell-tale darkish gray steam rising ahead of him. OPEN WATER! Father felt a terrible sinking feeling within him.

"Perhaps it is a narrow lead and I can easily get across it," he thought.

Clean Break

When he came upon the lead he was appalled to see that it was around 75 yards wide. He began to look frantically for an ice raft. He found a large one that was too big to handle. He was further appalled that the ice had broken clean without hardly any broken pieces of ice.

He saw one that might do quite a distance to the south. He dragged his seals to it and found that it was small. Would it float him? He tested it. It just did float him and the waterline was about a half-inch from the surface of the ice.

Hazardous Crossing

He got off carefully and then eased the two seals into the water, adjusted the loop of his drag line around his shoulders and carefully boarded the tiny ice raft.

He noticed that the cold temperature had started to freeze the surface of the water. Using his icepick rod as a paddle, he set out toward the shore ice. He made good progress for the first hundred feet and then he noticed something that made his heart sink. The thin ice on the surface was collecting on his raft when it took on water. The more of this slush collected, the lower his raft sank in the water. It was impossible to keep the little raft on an even keel as he paddled it.

Progress Slowed

When he was about midway on the lead, the slushy water was ankle deep in his raft. He tried to brush it off with his

icepick rod. It helped a little but as he went slowly forward, more of it collected. As he sank lower, he noticed that his forward motion had reduced alarmingly. Something had to be done.

He reached behind carefully and pulled the floating seals to his right side, pulled his knife out and cut off the line on the hindmost seal.

Precarious Balance

He resumed his paddling. Soon the slush water was calf deep. When he brushed some of it off he noticed the front of his raft tended to float up. Balancing on it was also getting precarious. He made fair progress after cutting off one of the seals.

When he was about 25 feet from the shore ice he was almost knee deep in the water. His lower legs began to get very cold. The water was now an inch and a half from the top of his waterproof mukluks. The draw strings at the top of them were quite tight and would help keep the water out if the water reached that high.

Almost There

When he was about 12 feet from the shore ice, he felt some trickles of extremely cold water running down his calves. They felt like hot needles against his skin.

The shore ice was now 8 feet away! He took his icepick rod by the pick end and reached for the shore ice. The hook caught just enough so he could pull himself forward. He eased himself very slowly to the ice. It was now within reach!

Grim Hold

He looked carefully for a good hand hold, slowly leaned forward and grabbed for the ice. He held on grimly and pulled himself up and out of the water. He was safe — so far!

In leaning and reaching forward his knees had sunk almost to the thighs. He felt more water getting into his legs but not very much. He took his hunting gear off and began to run around rapidly stamping his feet against the ice to work up good circulation around his feet. This he did for about five minutes. His feet began to tingle — a good sign.

If I could warm the moisture with the heat from my body I think I can make it home without freezing my feet," he thought.

Father was still four and a half miles from the village. The day was getting late and darkness was approaching. He set out dragging the seal going as fast as he could. When he felt his feet getting cold, he stopped and ran around to work up good circulation. He did this several times on the way.

He was approaching the village from the south side this time instead of the usual north side. "My wife and children will be looking for me there," he thought. He noticed the light on the north side of the village and knew the people were looking for him. He was comforted and distressed that he had caused all the anxiety.

Tension Released

He entered the village from a quarter of a mile south and no one seemed to have noticed him in the dark. When he came close to our house he noticed a lone figure coming from the north beach and knew at once it was mother. He shouted to her and she came running to him. Mother's emotion had given way then.

Years later father would say, "Keshorna, did you care that much for me?" "If it hadn't

been for your foolishness we wouldn't have had to worry so much," mother would retort.

That evening as father looked at his slashed mukluk mother had taken off. "Look at those things! I'll never hunt in them again" and they were my favorites," he laughed.

Apportioning

When the skin was off the seal, mother began to cut it in pieces expertly weaving through the bone joints.

"Take these to the Kunook and Kingik families," she said to my sister. She directed me to take others to several other families who were in dire need for food.

By the time she was through apportioning the seal there was about a quarter of it left for our own use. The seal was about the average size of about 75 pounds. About 20 pounds of that was blubber and skin.

I didn't need to have felt distressed. When hunting conditions repaid with meat almost twofold by the families to whom my parents had given parts of the seal.

The Arctic Way

Father's dangerous hunt is a demonstration of how the people of the Arctic have lived through cooperation with one another. Our family not only benefited but many other families as well.

Sharing is one of the keys of survival of man in the Arctic. The consideration of one's fellow man under trying conditions is the Arctic's unwritten law. It is practiced the selflessness which has rewarded the benefactor more than he has given. It has created a close knit relationship among the people of the northern communities.

Selfishness has had no place in the existence of man in the Arctic regions.