

Opinion

A time for healing for Natives

By Charlie Kairaiuak

When Apanguluk was growing up in his village there were no white people living in the community except for a priest who occasionally stayed for about a month and a half while making his rounds. The only consistent teachers were the Elders and his parents. The Elders taught him about the history, the mythologies, the prophecies and the Native Way of Life. He grew up learning how to hunt and fish and survive off the land and the sea. He saw dances and ceremonies that had been practiced and passed from one generation to the next for thousands of years.

Then the federal government came in and put in a school. When he went to the white man's school he was told by his teachers that everything he knew about his people was wrong, that he should not speak his own language and totally commit himself to becoming an assimilated Native who would think, act and feel like a white man. The school policy was to punish any student that did not follow any of the strict rules of conduct established by the U.S. Department of Education. Because his parents encouraged him to learn as much as he could from these alien teachers, Apanguluk continued to ask questions in his Native tongue, the only language he had ever spoken, despite the physical, mental and emotional suffering he endured as a result of frequently inflicted abuse.

Shortly after Apanguluk started in this school he was forced to attend Christian fundamental classes. He was told that his people's spiritual beliefs and practices were no good because the priest believed (without ever asking why they believed or practiced certain things) that they were the work of the devil. He was told that his every thoughts, feelings and actions that were human were enough to send him into the pits of hell. He was also punished severely whenever he broke any of the strict Christian rules of conduct. The spiritual suffering was much worse than the mental, physical and emotional abuse.

Apanguluk had to leave his village to continue his education. He went to a Bureau of Indian Affairs high school in the lower 48 states, then a year later transferred to a public high school back east where he graduated. Upon completion he attended an Ivy League college for one year.

Shortly after his return to Alaska he was hired by the regional social, educational and economical organization serving his area. He started traveling to the local villages and working with his people. He fought for the protection of his peoples' hunting, fishing and land rights. He labored continuously to preserve his peoples' traditions and culture.

As time passed he began to understand the magnitude of the destruction, fraud and genocide

of his people. The more he saw his peoples' struggling and suffering the more he turned to alcohol and drugs, prevalent in the Native political arena, to kill his own pain. The continuous amount of pressure and work it took to do his job effectively the easier it was for him to fall into the addictions and behavior of alcoholism. Inevitably he joined the ranks of many Native people who became alcoholics.

During the time of his darkest days, Apanguluk experienced a powerful spiritual vision that guided him toward a healing path. The first step was to seek help from Alcoholics Anonymous and later he began attending individual counseling sessions on a regular basis. Eventually he also joined a therapeutic encounter group designed for men recovering from suppressed anger induced by early years of abuse, sexual, relationship and co-dependency addictions. Despite the energy extended in these efforts toward healing and recovery Apanguluk continued to experience a sense of being incomplete. He reverted back to his old behaviors which eventually lead to his second downfall.

Even though he messed up again he did not turn to alcohol or drugs. Instead, he sought more help and finally connected with a traditional spiritual healer. This was the first time that he had felt wholistically since his childhood. He understands this feeling because of the teachings of the Elders, the many hours and years spent talking with and helping other Native people, working with many struggling and recovering Native peoples and personal relationships with recovered/unrecovered people who had their own severe problems.

In talking with many Elders, many, many adult Natives and many, many young Natives, Apanguluk has learned that a majority of his people are suffering from the same experiences. The inherited effects of the Great Death by famine and disease which our people have never had a chance to heal and recover from, diminished Native Way of Life, forced loss of songs and language and self esteem and pride. But the greatest loss has been the powerful ceremonies which were the daily source of spiritual strength, healing and which enabled their connectedness to the land, plants, animals, birds, fish and all helpful forms of spirits and elements of power within their universe.

You see, I know Apanguluk personally because I am Apanguluk Charlie Kairaiuak. I was born in the Yupik village of Cheformak which is west of Bethel on the Bering Sea coast. I am sharing my story with you because I know that part of my healing and recovery is contingent on your healing and your recovery. I believe this because one of the Yupik Prophecies says that our people would experience

the Great Death, Live a Great Lie and come to a point in their lives where the people would have to take one of two paths. One path would lead to the death of all Yupik peoples. The other path would lead back to the daily practices of the traditional values and principles passed down to us from our Ancestors.

Our Elders have suffered the longest because they have watched their parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and sometimes their villages die from the famine and disease. Some of them were forced to leave their own villages wherever the government schools and Christian denominational churches were built. They were pushed aside and forgotten when the new forms of government, education and religion were forced upon their people with promises of protection and a better way of life. They watched their family hunting, fishing and berry picking camps and lands stolen by white governments, companies and individuals. But the worst experience they are forced to endure is to watch their own people continue to die.

They watched their people die from alcohol, drugs, abuses and violent crimes. They watched their culture and traditions die whenever their grandchildren did not learn to speak their Native language, songs and dances. They watch the Native Spirituality die as they watch their people lose respect of the Elders, the land, animals, birds, fish, spirits and elements of power and themselves. They watch as their people continue to die as Native People.

The Native adults struggle daily to survive the great pressure of being assimilated. They labor and worry continuously about how they are going to meet the expenses of a cash economy system when living in an environment where there is no or limited economic development in their village. Even when they hunt and fish traditionally, which is their inalienable right and the only way they can feed their families, (See: *Native people*, page 12)

Native people are born with special gifts

(From page seven)

alien governments continuously breathe on their backs to follow their laws designed for sport hunters, not a Way of Life.

The result of this immense struggle has lead to a large majority of Native adults who possess a sense of very low self-esteem. It is difficult to have pride of oneself when you cannot provide for the minimal or essential needs of your family because children do not grow up strong and healthy just on love. This fact, I believe, is the main cause for Alaska Native adults to have the lowest average life expectancy, highest rate of alcoholism, highest rate of suicides, etc. of any group of people in the United States.

The Native children live in a world which, to date has been devastating to the Native Elders and their parents, and has created for them only a dismal future to look forward to. At an early age

they begin to experience the suffering of their people therefore becoming the victims of the original oppressors. It is that like-minded, destructive belief system that maintains and systematically attacks, demoralizes and despiritualizes Native people.

There is hope today because many Native people are beginning to heal and recover. Those that have healed and recovered are turning to help other Native Peoples. They are forming groups that meet together to teach each other their languages, history, mythologies, songs and dances. They get together in healing circles. Some are even starting to perform and participate in sacred ceremonies.

The path of daily practice of traditional ceremonies has the strong, spiritual healing medicine that our people need today. It is the only known way that people can heal wholistically. The spiritual, physical, mental and emo-

tional being of Real Human Beings is not only healed but also keep all of the elements of one being in balance so that one can continue to be strong without feeling that they are bad because they are thinking, feeling and acting as a Real Human Being.

The last point I would like to make is that there are Native People who are born with special gifts of healing. Like our Elders, they have been pushed aside because those that were seeking to recruit and convert us to their religion do not understand that Ellam-Yua (Person of the Universe), Great Spirit, God or whatever you choose to call him gives special gifts so that his unlimited power can touch those that need it. We must keep our eyes open so that we can encourage them to help us heal.

**IT IS TIME FOR HEALING
OF ALL THE NATIVE
PEOPLES OF ALASKA!**