

Pain: Physical hurt or spiritual suffering

by Arlene Barr

Chukchi News and Information Service

SHISHMAREF — Have you ever experienced the word *pain* in more than one way?

The word itself means a physical or mental suffering caused by injury, disease, anxiety or grief. The first example of pain I shall describe is the kind most commonly caused by a physical injury.

Inupiat Paitot People's Heritage

OPINION

In the summer of 1983, the city of Shishmaref hired my brother, Gideon Jr., and me as land surveyors to use a delicate and special instrument called a transit.

Together we would build and complete a cement seawall, which is now located on the northern part of our sandy island.

As the weeks flew by, we worked 12 to 18 hours a day, depending on the weather and tide, and the majority of the time, seven days a week. Sonny and I worked as accurately as possible, unbelievably hard and very close.

It wasn't only our job that made us work closely together, as we'd always been "linked" in many ways.

One afternoon on the job, the wind began gusting at 40 miles without warning. After an hour of trying to cope with the strong wind and the blowing sand, Sonny and I and the entire crew decided to move inside the National Guard Building where we stored our equipment.

When we finally were through for the day, I checked the knob of the building's inner door to make sure that it was locked. Before closing the door, I lit a cigarette. At that moment, the strong eastern wind blew past me, and the door slammed with a loud bang.

A quick, sharp sensation tingled in my right ear. My hand reached to it. "Ouch!" I said to myself, wondering what had happened as I shut the main entrance.

By the time I reached my house, my ear was beginning to throb with pain, but thinking it was only temporary, I went straight to bed, totally exhausted.

I woke up to an awful piercing pain, as if someone were jabbing my eardrum with a long, narrow needle all the way through my head to the other ear. The longer I sat there, the worse it got.

As I sat there trying to hold back the pain with my hand, I noticed my hair and ear were soaked and wet. My hand was covered with blood. Confused and in pain, I rushed to Mom's house to use the phone.

After I explained to the health aide what had happened, I got a prescription to take three drops of medication at a time, when needed.

I had Mom put the required amount of medicine in my ear. As soon as the liquid entered the ear canal, the piercing pain got worse, making me scream and cry in agony like a baby receiving her first shot.

The awful pain felt like a huge, open-flamed torch slowly entering my ear, trying to burn the inside of my skull. This was so painful that even to this day, I have no interest in finding out exactly what had happened the rest of that night.

The second example of pain I shall describe is the grief I experienced in October 1985.

Thinking back, I remember sharing the majority of my young life with my

one and only full-blooded brother, Gideon Jr., who was better known as "Sonny" to our immediate family and close friends. He was very energetic, creative and caring.

When he wasn't out in the country hunting, he would spend countless hours in the shop, which he had built, making homemade furniture or fixing old machinery.

Our relationship was similar to a relationship between brothers. Sonny taught and showed me how to live and survive in the country whether it be during the winter or summer. In return, I would teach him how to sew, knit or cook something new.

Sometimes when one of us had to go somewhere alone, either on a business or pleasure trip, we would actually become lonesome for one another — even before the trip took place! He would mention how quiet it was going to be while hunting, or I would tell him how boring and empty the house would feel without him and his friends.

The last time I saw Sonny alive, he was waiting for Dad to finish packing his camping gear and was reading a Mickey Mouse book to our 3-year-old nephew, Thomas.

I can still see his straight white teeth as he smiled, while purposely making a mistake or joke just to hear Thomas correct it or to make the child burst into laughter. If I'd only known that would be the last time Sonny would spend time with his favorite character, Thomas, I would have followed my brother to camp.

I can recall sitting across from the

storyteller and listener, noticing Sonny's well-built, muscular frame. His medium-brown skin complemented the color of his black hair that hung down to his shoulders.

The radiant expression on his face made his Eskimo-shaped eyes sparkle. One glance at Sonny and you knew instantly that he was a devoted and hard-working young man.

At the time, I was waiting for a Bering Air flight to Nome so I could get

fishing," Sonny said, interrupting his own story.

I could imagine the fun of setting and checking a net, shooting then plucking the ducks and both of us sitting in the boat jigging our fish hooks in the middle of a small river.

Suddenly, the plane flew like a flash of thunder over our little village.

"Sis, I wonder how long will you stay? I know Mom will worry a lot about you at camp, so make sure you

Due to bad weather, I had to wait for five long hours before the plane could leave. As I waited at the airport, I purposely did not call home because I dreaded hearing which Gideon had passed away.

away from a troublesome relationship with my lover.

"Geez that plane! If it doesn't arrive in the next 15 minutes, I'll cancel my trip to Nome and go camping instead," I said impatiently as I sat across from the two "silly" characters.

"Yeah, sis, why don't you? Our camp will be super quiet and lonesome without you, especially while

send a message over the radio, huh? I know she'll feel a lot better after hearing from you," he said as he got up to give me a brotherly hug.

I can still hear his concern over the baby I was carrying — my first — who was kicking my stomach as if it knew we were going on a plane ride.

A couple days later, as I was lying

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down in my hotel room watching TV, the hotel attendant knocked at my door.

"It's a family emergency," she told me with an incredibly serious look on her face.

By telephone, I reached my sister's husband, Jon.

"Jon, what's going on?" I asked him.

"Well, the people that have CB radios are saying that something has happened to one of the Gideons. Most of them are saying that it's Sonny that died, but I'm not too sure."

"How could that be? I bet it's just a big misunderstanding. Sonny's much too healthy and young to die," I told him. "I'll be home on the 12 noon flight," I said, then hung up.

I dialed Ryan Air to make my reservation home. Then the longest wait of my life began. Due to the bad weather, I had to wait for five long hours before the plane could leave. As I waited at the airport, I purposely did not call home because I dreaded hearing which Gideon had passed away.

When the plane finally took me

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home, I couldn't believe how many people were there at the airport. When I stepped out of the plane, everyone was super quiet, and I actually felt their eyes fixed on my face as my boyfriend, Steve, hugged me.

"Hon, is it true that it was Sonny?" I asked.

"Yes, Love. I'm sorry."

As I entered Mom's house, I dreaded hearing the real story, but forced myself to listen. Mom said

when Sonny left the camp to hunt ducks, he left on an empty stomach and told her that he would return before dinner. He was wearing only his "street clothes," a jean jacket, rubber boots and his favorite raincoat.

The weather was just "perfect" when he left. I guess he didn't expect the weather to change on him without warning. My one and only brother was deceived by the unpredictable weather and died of hypothermia.

When I heard this, I felt as if a cold northern wind was blowing the love and warmth out of my body into the empty and frozen land. The emptiness it left inside felt colder than the coldest winter, so that even the hottest heat of the sun or the heat of a wood-burning stove could not melt it. The pain felt like a frozen brick of ice lodged inside my heart.

Even though it's been nearly five years, I still have this feeling inside that my brother exists here today, only he cannot be seen or spoken to. Some days, this feeling flares up so strong inside of me that I actually have to visit his grave just to see the proof of his death.

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