“Myth America:
How I traveled in Alaska for 10 Years and Never Saw an Igloo”

A Sermon by Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, August 19, 2007
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

I suspect you may have seen the title of this sermon and wondered “what on earth is he going to talk about?” I wrote the title two months ago on the way to my 25th trip through Alaska and forgot it. When I got back this week I asked the same question. It’s about our myths about that spectacular place that is America’s last Frontier, our most natural and beautiful state, there where the contrast between Natives and non-natives is the greatest in the nation.

I’ve never seen an igloo in Alaska. There’s a good reason. Alaskans never made igloos. One Myth down! It was the Inuits of Canada and Greenland who made them for temporary shelter—and they hardly lived in them either. They aren’t very comfortable. But when you’re stuck out on the ice and a storm is coming one can be put up in an hour. When it’s 60 below outside, it can be 60 above inside an igloo with only an oil lamp and your body as the heat sources. At least that’s what the Canadian Inuits say.

The only igloo I know in Alaska is inside the Ice Museum at Chena Hot Springs, 60 miles north of Fairbanks. I swam at Chena three winters ago in the hot springs pool, surrounded by snowbanks when it was 10 below. They had an Ice Hotel there then, with ice beds in ice bedrooms that rented for $300 a night. Tickets to look inside cost $15. I stood outside and marveled at the gullibility that draws us to sideshows. I was too cheap to pay so I missed my chance to look in. The hotel melted in the 85 degree heat that summer.

Alaskans are nothing if not indomitable icemen and icewomen. They built the ice house again as a museum the next winter, and put a shell around it so they could keep it at 20 degrees Farenheit inside year around. In addition to the igloo it holds ice carvings of a two story ice castle tower with a circular stairway and life-size jousters on horseback. The ice bar has a working fireplace. I think the flames are created by non-heat-emitting LED’s. It has an ice outhouse, just in case the spirit moves you. The heating and cooling are provided by a renewable energy geo-thermal system based in the hot springs and a cold river that flows by.

Alaskans are different from people outside. In the first place, they refer to all of us as being “outside” as if the world were measured from where they live. What other Americans would have the chutzpah to declare everyone else “outsiders”? They call Alaska newcomers “chechakos” and they do welcome everyone who comes—if you come in.

Most people from outside come up these years on cruise ships. Most of them don’t really see Alaska. They see the ship and the front of the beauty. They want to see it and be able to walk to and from it in a matter of minutes. That’s like going to New York City on the Staten Island ferry and keeping the boat in sight wherever you go in the city.

Alaskans are tolerant of that. In Alaska, everyone is your neighbor. You never know when you’ll need her help or she’ll need yours. They’re ready to give it. The state too. It pays everyone about $1,500 annually just for living there, every man, woman and child. No income taxes.

Alaska is a big place, and neighbors live far apart. How big? If you cut Alaska in two parts,

Texas would be the third largest state. It took me 32 hours to fly back in the fastest routing possible. I spent some of that time waiting in airports. Still, 32 hours. I flew from Unalaska, the farthest north-western airport with scheduled flights. It's closer to Tokyo than to Seattle. Unalaska doesn't mean "not-Alaska." It's a Russian mongrelization of an Unangan Native word.

The Unangans lived on the Aleutian Islands for thousands of years before the Russians took over in the 1700's and made them slaughter sea otters for the fur pelts. The Russians traded the pelts to the Chinese for tea. Most of the Natives died of diseases the outsiders brought in. When the otters got hard to find and the Russians decided Alaska was too far from home to defend it from the British Empire, they sold it in 1867 to the U.S. for 2¢ an acre. Americans derided it, calling it Seward's Folly or Seward's Icebox.

Our government killed the last of the sea otters for their pelts—they thought. The otter was declared extinct in 1925. Six years later a small pod was found on an obscure Aleutian island. They started their comeback after World War II, and numbered 100,000 by 1980. They've declined to 6,000 and in 2005 were declared a threatened species.

It wasn't only sea otters that were plundered by the U.S. government. In 1942 the Japanese bombed Unalaska and invaded two of the Aleutian islands. Our government panicked and took all of the Unangan people from their homes. With no notice they were taken with only their suitcases to Southeast Alaska where they were warehoused in unheated bunkhouses and abandoned packing plants for three years. The occupying U.S. troops looted the villages and churches and burned down many of the homes.

In 1945 our government returned the Aleut Unangan survivors to their islands. Some were never allowed to go home. 40% died in the camps. You knew about the Nisei, the Japanese-Americans put in concentration camps during World War II. I bet you had never heard of the Unangans. Congress apologized to them and the Japanese Americans in 1988 but they've never been fully compensated.

Much Native Alaskan heritage has been destroyed in the interface between their traditional and our contemporary American cultures, but something is now beginning to be done to help the youth. I talked with several school teachers who went into the bush this summer with groups of native and non-native youth in culture camps where they learn more about their heritage. However they have a long way to go to involve more than a few Native Alaskan youth.

Only 19% of Alaskans are Natives. They face far greater problems than does the rest of the population. About 60% of Native Alaskans live in rural areas, often in small villages located far from urban centers. The cost of cultural breakdown for them has been severe. I visited an Inupiat couple in their modest home in the village of Teller by the Bering Sea in July. The landscape was stark, treeless. It's always been that way. Their home was a metal shack, tiny and cluttered with CD's, their main entertainment.

Amnesty International released reports this year that showed that Alaska has the highest incidence of forcible rapes of any US state. Figures for the rural areas are hard to get because the people are scattered across such vast areas with inadequate police protection. In Anchorage, native people were 10 times more likely to experience sexual assault than others. 86% of perpetrators were non-natives.

The suicide rate among Native Alaskans from 2003 to 2006 was three times that of nonnative

Alaskan residents and five times the national U.S. rate. Young Male Native Alaskans (20 to 29 year-olds) kill themselves more often than any other age group, while nationally their age group accounts for only a small number of U.S. suicides. Native Alaskan boys aged 10 to 19 are fifteen times more likely to kill themselves than non-native boys.

"They've lost their culture, they don't have a way to support their family, and then what we see is a lot of alcohol and drug use, particularly alcohol," said the state manager for prevention and early intervention, to an Amnesty International interviewer. "There's such a feeling of hopelessness, particularly for young men."

Alaska is a spectacular state. Thousands of outsiders visit each year and never see either the greatest beauty or the worst degradation of Native Alaskans. They'll see a few drunks on Anchorage streets on their way to Denali National Park. Alaskans joke that Anchorage, with 300,000 people isn't really Alaska—but you can get to Alaska from there.

Outsiders have lots of myths about Alaska. We've never gotten over the jokes about Seward's Icebox. People I have taken each year are fearful about how cold it will be. I tell them that when we get to Fairbanks, they'll probably wish they were home where it may be cooler. It's often 85 degrees in the summer, and muggy. It's much more comfortable in the winter when the cold is dry. We were there three winters ago to see the Northern Lights, and though it was often a few degrees below zero it didn't feel too cold. Alaskans dress for the temperature and love it.

In the Southeast, the winters may be mild, like Delaware. My son spent two years in Ketchikan in the Coast Guard, and he says there was no snow at all one winter. There was rain though, 14 feet of it that year.

Now that we've said goodbye, perhaps for the last time, I know we'll miss Alaska. We've turned our program over to a member of the Fairbanks Fellowship to run. We had a dozen years working with the members of five UU Fellowships. Each of them has a few Native Alaskan members. One gave me my first taste of whale. Ugh.

Alaskan Unitarian Universalists are like us outsider UU's in many ways, but they are different too. In Fairbanks, where we helped build the farthest north UU church in the world with our wUUrld program, about 30% of members depend on animals they shoot and fish they catch for protein.

The rest of the members who are not hunters and fishers eat wild game often. Each summer they race the bears to the berry bushes in the countryside. Many of them have had curious encounters with bears in the wild, and moose frequently wander into their backyards. They live close to the earth, and they want it that way, with all the problems that entails for the joy that they also experience.

A significant number of them still use outhouses, not because they cannot afford inside plumbing, but because they live on tundra, and they cannot sink their pipes into the earth that is permafrost a few inches down. That's part of what living close to the earth means to them, and they don't want to give it up. They love feeling their connection with the interdependent web of all existence, of which we too are a part, though we live insulated from its reality in our lives.

I'm going to close with an Inupiat song about the closeness to the earth that Alaskans all experience, in one way and another in their lives.

I'm filled with joy
when the day dawn quietly
over the roof of the sky.

Life was wonderful
in winter.
But did winter make me happy?
No, I always worried
about hides for boot-soles
and for boots;
and if there'd be enough
for all of us.
Yes, I worried constantly.

Life was wonderful
in summer.
But did summer make me happy?
No, I always worried
about reindeer skins and rugs for the platform.
Yes, I worried constantly.

Life was wonderful
when you stood at your fishing hole
on the ice.
But was I happy waiting at my fishing hole?

No, I was always worried
for my little hook,
in case it never got a bite.
Yes, I worried constantly.

Life was wonderful
when you danced in the feasting-house.
But did this make me any happer?
No, I always worried
I'd forget my song.
Yes, I worried constantly.

Life was wonderful. . .
And I still feel joy
each time the day-break
whitens the dark sky
each time the sun
climbs over the roof of the sky.