



CHAPTER 3

She'll Do What She Needs to Do

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I remember when I was around nineteen or twenty, my father, who was at the time the president of our regional Tribal Council, Iñupiat Community of the Arctic Slope, addressed a living room full of visitors in town covering a story on melting sea ice. They were pushing him to tell stories as a 'Native elder', about the devastation of the Arctic due to climate change. They were fishing for the same stories we often see in media from First Nations people around the world around the devastation and difficulties they are experiencing. My father, well versed in conversing with outsiders, responded:

What do I think of climate change? I say bring it on. As Native people we've lived sustainably and in harmony with the earth for tens of thousands of years. And then these great big countries have only taken 200 years to unsettle everything. But the earth will never lose. She'll do what she needs to do. She'll clear the slate and then she'll start again. And as that happens, as things get colder or hotter, as storms get worse and droughts go longer, we Native people, we will be the only ones to survive, because we know how to live with the earth. So I say, bring it on.

My father's summation of climate change has always brought a wry smile to my face. Not because I share all of his views of how things might play out, but because he is a beautiful, gentle man with a heart big enough to hold all the pain and trauma of his childhood as a native person, big enough to soak his seven children with love, big enough to defend the rights of our people for the past fifty years and yet still with some room in it to share a cautionary tale with those

who have tried to oppress him and our people since they first arrived to exploit our lands.

I do share my father's concerns about the way in which 'modern' humans have impacted our earth. Like him, I think powerful industrialized nations need a wake-up call. Climate change may be the biggest threat facing a multitude of unprepared developed and developing nations but as an Iñupiaq woman I cannot help feeling the approach being taken by most (even the most 'progressive') of these nations appears to be not just flawed, but actively avoiding the difficult conversations about the root cause.

Carbon emissions may well be creating the environmental conditions for irreversible climate change. But are not these emissions merely a symptom of the social, political and historical conditions that fixed this crisis in place many centuries ago? We were taught as young Iñupiaq children to observe a problem and understand its root cause before arriving at a solution. Using that approach, this crisis tracks much further back than industrial pollution and therefore, in order to be sustainable, the solutions will require a much deeper and much more uncomfortable interrogation of the system and fundamental drivers that created this crisis.

Understanding What Informs Our Being

Our people, the Iñupiat from Arctic Alaska, are members of the Inuit nation that spans almost the whole of the Circumpolar North. As Iñupiaq people, we are raised to observe, on a daily and hourly basis, the weather patterns, the changes in plant growth, the changes in animal migration patterns and behaviour. Our social, political, spiritual, emotional and physical existence is tied, on a day-to-day basis, to the health of the animals and plants in the ecosystem we are dependent upon. We have thrived in one of the harshest climates on the planet precisely because our lives and laws revolve around the core principles of sustainability and subsistence. Central to our ability to live sustainably for tens of thousands of years has been our focus as a people on looking holistically, inclusively and critically at all problems.

Our epistemological and ontological truths grow first from our environment and our place in its ecosystem. Like many First Nations peoples, our long-term and complex relationship with our environment fuels our understanding (through a daily lived experience) that we come from/are of the land, ocean/waterways, air/cosmos, and

animals. We do not see ourselves as masters of the land or the ocean. Our dominance over the earth is neither realistic nor part of how we exist.

There are two fundamental Iñupiaq concepts, common to all Inuit communities – *nuna*, loosely meaning land, and *siġa*, loosely meaning air/atmosphere – which may help to illustrate these core understandings of our Iñupaiq relationship to our environment.

In the Iñupiaq dictionary, by Dr Edna MacLean, *siġa* is translated as ‘air, atmosphere, weather’. *Nuna*, in the same dictionary, is translated as ‘ground, tundra, earth: inland; country, territory: a citizen’s nation-state’ (MacLean 2014).

Our Elders Fannie Kuutuuq Akpik and Jana Pausauraq Harcharek discuss *siġa* as follows: ‘*Siġa* is the weather. It is also the atmosphere. Here’s the *nuna*, or the land, and anything from the land into the moon, the sun, the stars – that’s all *siġa*. *Siġa* has a soul in the same way we do as people in the same way animals do.’

Alaska Fairbanks Iñupiaq instructor, Ronald Brower, speaking about the concept of *siġa*, says:

Siġa has many meanings that I know of. One, *siġa* is within me, I breathe in *siġa*. And then at night I could look into the sky and I could see the stars, so they said that *siġa* is within us and infinitely far away. It can also be our breath. *Siġa* imparts life to all living things and all living things must have *siġa* to be alive. So from that we then enter into the spiritual realm of *siġa*, which is then dealing with ourselves our inner selves and how we relate to the rest of the universe around us. (Brower 2013)

In this way, the very life force that is within us is also the weather around us and the life force that fuels the universe. *Siġa* and *nuna* are vitally important to all aspects of the self and Iñupiaq way of life. Canadian Inuit writer Rachel Attituq Qitsualik describes *siġa* and *nuna* this way:

How was the weather behaving? That was always our primary concern upon rising from sleep. ‘Go out and see the *siġa*,’ my father would instruct. We were to scan the horizon, practicing our powers of observation. Was there anything unusual, out of place, not in keeping with the *siġa*? What was the aspect of *siġa*? Calm? Thunderous? Threatening? What was the color of *siġa*, gray, red or blue? The edge of *siġa*, the horizon, what did it tell you? Was it dark? If so, a storm was on its way. Were the clouds white on gray, or gray on white, a critical difference. It was all-important to be able to read *siġa*. *Siġa* and *nuna* determined your existence. It was no wonder the word *siġa* also meant ‘wisdom.’ A person with a ‘large *siġa*’

was wise... Even today, traditional Inuit wisdom maintains that the body has its own *siġa*. *Siġa* is the air and we who have our own air also have a part of *siġa* – a part of its life force’. (Qitsualik 2018)

These concepts of *nuna* and *siġa* may seem opaque or even romantic to those inexperienced with Inuit lifestyles. However, they illustrate the intertwining of the environment with our being and explain why we come to our relationship with the earth with humility. It’s in this way that the complexity of Iñupiaq political and social systems rests in a set of understandings and tools for navigating life in a balanced and respected way together and always in a sustainable way, with our particular ecosystem.

I provide this brief overview, of a small corner of my understanding of an Iñupiaq way of being, in the hope that by means of comparison, it might encourage policy makers and leaders to shed their own light on the first challenge facing their governments if they want to find real solutions to climate change. I believe the first part of that challenge is to acknowledge the ‘fundamental principles’ that seem to have informed how they and their ancestors (as colonizers) approached the land, the people and the resources in First Nations’ territories.

I cannot speak for the experiences of other First Nations communities, so I limit myself to the experience of First Nations communities in North America and begin by framing this comparison in its most essential form, with a few extracts of how the colonizing state bodies wrote about how they approached the ‘native peoples’ or ‘Indians’ (sic) of this land.

The dominant policy of the Federal Government toward the American Indian has been one of forced assimilation which has vacillated between the two extremes of coercion and persuasion. *At the root of the assimilation policy has been a desire to divest the Indian of his land and resources ... thus freeing large amounts of additional land for the white man.* [my emphasis] (United States 1969)

The Indians must conform to ‘the white man’s ways,’ *peaceably if they will, forcibly if they must.* They must adjust themselves to their environment, and conform their mode of living substantially to our civilization. This civilization may not be the best possible, but it is the best the Indians can get. [my emphasis] (United States 1880)

As an Iñupiaq person who occupies the in-between spaces of Iñupiaq society and Anglo-American society I have spent most of my adult life learning about and reflecting upon the evolution of the

Iñupiaq relationship with Anglo-American society and governments since those early contact days. The settler-colonial relationship continues to inform the American Government and Iñupiaq tribal authorities continue to seek ways to maintain and assert their sovereign status.

To get underneath the ‘fundamental principles’ that I perceive have informed successive government’s attitudes to our people, it is important to go back to the beginning. The first ‘explorers’ that came to our sovereign territory did not come to inhabit our land. There was no intention to live in this new environment. They came in search of resources to extract and exploit. Because of this, they presumably didn’t feel the need to learn to live sustainably on our land. The ‘fundamental principles’ that informed their approach to our land and our people were in every way, by circumstance and intent, exploitative. As a consequence, they neither looked for nor sought out any knowledge from our people about how the animals, land, air and the waters breathe, move, respond and change.

Our value to settler colonists and states has only ever been measured by the amount of access we could provide for them to our resource rich land. This is certainly the case in Alaska and the relationship with our Iñupiaq people is, I suspect, not so different to the relationship other colonizing nations established with the First Nations’ communities they encountered (Wolfe 2006). In declaring their way of being in such a way, those early colonizers declared from the outset that the environment was not something with spirit, or knowledge or any kind of integrated relationship with humans that walked within it.

Once the extent of resources on our land became apparent to the early colonists, they proceeded to set up colonies. In this process they ‘claimed’ the ‘new land’ under their legal constructs and in that process provided themselves with a ‘justifiable’ (albeit racist and legally unfounded) platform for the relentless exploitation and extraction of our resources back to their countries of origin. There was never and has never been a plan for sustainability. Which leads me to ask – how do these nations and decision-makers possibly think that from this foundation, with these operational settings, using tools that come from this history, they can even begin to unpick the climate crisis that this exploitation driven ‘way of being’ has created?

Like many First Nations people who have educated me, I look at this history that informs colonizing states and feel a degree of sympathy for them. Their origins are soaked not just in the trauma of separation from their countries of origin but in the trauma of separating

from a grounded sense of being in their own countries that must have existed at some point in their history. What has been the impact of trauma on the colonizer, of entering a new territory and ignoring every fibre of the human need to feel connected to the land and waters we live within? In echoing the wisdom of Resmaa Menakem (2017), I have also wondered for many years how this trauma has been compounded by the trauma of inflicting so much pain on other communities with the sole defence being extraction and exploitation for one's own benefit.

'Ways of being and knowing', 'ontological and epistemological truths' – no matter which way you frame the language, the interrogation of colonial nations' origin stories upon the lands of First Nations peoples tells us a lot about why we are in this current climate crisis. If leaders and climate change policy thinkers were able and willing to locate the origin of climate change where it actually exists, they would be compelled to acknowledge that the political and economic drivers of their growth have always been based on an unsustainable and inhumane model that is dependent on exploitation of land, people and resources. And in acknowledging this, they would be liberated to acknowledge that their economic model of perpetual growth keeps crashing and needs an overhaul because it goes against the laws of nature and sustainability.

Understanding What Informs Our Decision-Making

For over 10,000 years (or by our own accounts more) we have learned to live together, intertwined with our environment, sustainably. Our society is grounded by four fundamental laws. The Maligugaksrat, or, as our cousins in Inuktitut (Canadian Arctic) call it, the Maligait, are four key laws in the Inuit world that guide everything we do (Tagalik 2009). Those four laws are:

1. Respect all living things
2. Work for the common good
3. Maintain harmony and balance
4. Continually plan for the future

These Maligugaksrat ground our decision-making process in a matrix that is holistic, long-term, critically conscious and consensus driven. Everything is judged against this. Our knowledge is grown

from a transfer of ancestral heritage and also from a pedagogy that requires us to observe, listen, meditate and reflect upon our environment and each other. In this process we grow our relational knowledge of the earth and our people and simultaneously grow our critical consciousness.

I recall as a child being on a family hunting trip out on the Arctic Ocean in a small tin boat. It was a perfect spring day, the blue sky and water of the Arctic inviting our family to join them. We were learning to drive the boat and Dad was teaching us how to navigate the ocean and how to 'see' animals. We searched the ocean, exploring and chatting excitedly; we knew how lucky we were. After an hour or so we were many miles offshore and when we looked up, the sky had changed colour to a deep grey. We (the kids) panicked just a little at first and then progressively more as we realized we had not been watching where we were travelling. Dad calmly announced to us that we had got ourselves 'turned around'. We didn't know which way was home.

After our (the kids') attempts to work out which way to go, Dad finally spoke up and told us to turn off the motor. Confused but completely unaware of our options, we did as we were told. My father then calmly poured himself a cup of coffee, lit a cigarette and waited. He observed the sky, the wind and the water. This was his way of calling on our ancestors and listening. After about twenty minutes he cleared his throat and asked us what we saw. Not having much to offer, he asked us to look again, and more closely he directed our attention to the ocean but this time to see the current we had been sitting on top of all along. We suddenly saw that the boat had turned itself around again and there, clear as could be, was the current running at the meeting of the two oceans. We quickly made the connection to where we must be and how we could find our way home.

The point of this story is not to fuel the already problematic fetishizing of our elders and their 'wisdom', but to demonstrate how we are raised to problem solve from a position of strength and humility. Firstly, our Dad didn't panic because he knew we were not lost. We are raised to understand that we are never lost if we stay grounded in our knowledge of the land and the waters that raised us. Secondly, he knew that the answer to the problem was in listening, hearing, and being humble to the situation they were in. If we reflect on our journey, listen to all the knowledge around us, acknowledge how we got into the place we are sitting, it's easier to map back to where we want to be.

Since colonizers have arrived in our country, they have brought a decision-making lens to all our interactions that is driven by the singular focus of exploitation. This approach to their decision-making has obscured not just the way in which they engage with us, but their ability to observe, hear, reflect and find a path forward that recognizes the extraordinary knowledge base that our people bring into the room, and often ignores pathways that would be more beneficial to our collective existence on our ancestral lands.

In the spring of 2016, just two months after Shell Oil withdrew its activities from our ocean waters, ending a forty-year battle against deep-water oil extraction in the Arctic, the United States Federal Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) arrived unannounced in Utqiagvik, Alaska, my home town. They brought with them several hundred pages of completed environmental studies, designed and conducted by them, assessing potential impacts to the environment of a new oil lease sale in the outer continental shelf off the north slope of Alaska. They had not consulted with our tribal government about these studies or the new lease. Their stated intention on this visit was to get community feedback on the studies. The studies had not been sent to the Tribe or the community in advance, much less constructed in consultation or collaboration.

I stood in the room as an observer, behind a camera, documenting the process. There were about fifteen staff from both State and Federal Offices. They were very excited because their scientists and researchers had, for the first time, mapped seventy years into the future, further than they had ever mapped, and had extended the survey area to look at the impact of oil exploration across a few extra map-blocks from offshore. They quieted the room and were ready with pen, paper, maps and cameras to take all and any comments.

The meeting had been scheduled to last two hours, and for the first hour and a half I watched the only three Iñupiaq participants in the room desperately trying to convey, to non-First Nations policy advisors, the threat to our way of life that offshore oil development represents. The Iñupiaq participants tried to explain that to understand the impact on the whales, the people and the environment, BOEM must look at the whole habitat of the whale, the people and the environment – not just four square blocks on a map of the ocean. They explained to the government staff that what ‘long-term planning’ means to the Iñupiaq people is seven generations – backwards and forwards – not just seventy years.

To convey their message they had to condense (much as I am doing here for you), into a handful of sentences, what our way of life is,

why it's important to us and why we are trying so desperately to hold onto it. It was and remains an impossible task but one that we seem to be endlessly engaged in with the colonial government agencies and decision-makers of the United States. Yet here were these three members of my community, once again trying to wrestle back control of yet another narrative and another decision that had the potential to completely undermine and destroy subsistence whaling, the backbone of Iñupiaq culture.

As a reader or an observer on that day, you might be forgiven for asking why, if this was so important, were there only three Iñupiaq people in the room?

Aside from arriving more or less unannounced, BOEM had visited on one of the most important days in the Iñupiaq calendar, the whalers' service, which is the official start of spring whaling. Some may surmise that this was deliberate timing on the part of the government to avoid the task of taking real feedback, navigating complex conversations, and hearing from an entire community. However, if we give the BOEM the benefit of the doubt, we can arrive at an equally disappointing but consistent conclusion: they had not thought about what they were doing in the context of the people, the land and the history we share. In a decision-making matrix that is driven to prioritize exploitation rather than collaboration and sustainability, they had applied the usual myopic or siloed approach to their process.

BOEM had applied their filters of knowledge to the issue and remit they were facing and ignored the people who might be better placed to inform how the decisions and assessments might be made. It is precisely because they are part of the United States federal government and not the Iñupiaq Community of the Arctic Slope (or a Native Village Tribe) that BOEM operates under a decision-making process that comes from and prioritizes American economic, social principles and American mandates built to sustain Anglo-centric cultural constructs.

Whether this model of exploitation of First Nations communities deliberately or accidentally silences and marginalizes First Nations 'ways of being and knowing', the effect is the same. This approach literally turns its back on an accumulated reserve of knowledge that has allowed us as First Nations people to live sustainably with each other and our environment in our regions for tens of thousands of years. The madness of it is that the same knowledge, agility of thinking and adaptation that our communities have developed over an unimaginably long period of time are the very approaches that the global community is now trying desperately to 'unearth' as the climate crisis deepens.

Understanding Our Holistic Approach

Whaling is an activity that spans the whole year, crosses all territory and draws from every aspect of our society. It not only provides physical, cultural and spiritual sustenance, it is the safety net of our whole community, our whole way of life. We could not continue whaling if we did not maintain it in a holistic (or multi-disciplinary) and long-term (or sustainable) relationship with the environment, animals and the people.

Historically whaling provided us with materials to build our houses and make the tools we needed to survive in our environment. Still today, when our whaling crews are given the gift of the whale, we are blessed with food and sustenance to feed our entire community throughout our long winters. Whaling provided and continues to provide us with ceremonial traditions throughout the year including (but not limited to) the Whale Festivals – *Nalukatak* and *Qagaruq* (celebrating a successful hunt and honouring the spirit of the whales) – the winter games (to build endurance and skills, share stories and celebrate through dance), *Kivgiq* Festival (The Messenger Feast and winter dance ceremony) and now the Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas feasts.

Our young boys and girls become men and women through whaling and the surrounding hunting traditions. The moral compass that guides an Iñupiaq adult can be pinned largely to these continued hunting traditions. From a spiritual perspective, our understanding of the environment, the nature of the animals and our relationship to everything around us is largely, if not wholly, informed by this mutual bond we share with the animals and our environment.

In describing this relationship between the Iñupiaq and the whale, Patrick Attungana, a revered whaling captain from Tikigaq (Point Hope), Alaska said:

We are Iñupiat on the shores of the seas... We eat the animals of the seas and of the land. We exist because of those older than we are. We live because we follow their example. Our body fluids are mixed with the blood of animals, with the oil of the animals – like the Iñupiat of old who used the same animals.

From the Iñupiat of the past, a covenant has been passed down. This covenant – a group of intelligent people who have a good sense of perception is like a book to their people. They have good memories and because of them, we can hunt whales today. This holds hunting together. We want

our descendants to follow this example. Those of us who are getting older, even older than I, want our descendants to follow the teachings and to be obedient. (Attungana 1985)

This concept is hard to translate into English, but points to our people's understanding and lived reality as integrated members of an ecosystem with all the complexity that dependence and integration carries through the generations and across our society. It integrates the physical, spiritual and cultural connections to the animals that sustain us, directly through our ancestry.

In short, we could not be a whaling community if we thought in siloed, short-term ways. We could not be a whaling community if we made decisions that benefited only a few, or decisions that failed to consider the long-term consequences of our actions.

As a result of this inheritance and our worldview, many Iñupiaq people can see the profound damage inflicted on our community and our sustainable and integrated way of life when siloed thinking and a system driven by a perpetual growth model (based on resource extraction and exploitation) is applied to us. The extent of that damage and the lengths to which the government has gone to break our community's holistic connection to the lands and waters is a constant theme of our resistance.

Our holistic being, our ontology and epistemology is a continual reminder to the United States Government of their unsustainable approach to our lands and their repeated attempts to force us into 'a system designed to dissolve the Indian social structure'. In the context of the current climate crisis, now is the time for leaders and policy makers to acknowledge the strength of our system, the inherent sustainability of our way of living, rather than continuing to force us to adopt a way of living that has led the colonizer into a state of social and environmental crisis.

Our elders never stop teaching us these critical lessons. During a recent Cultural Safety workshop I was co-facilitating with one of our community organizations, I was fortunate enough to hear senior elder and community leader Rex Okakok recount the story of the revitalization of *Kivgiq*. The *Kivgiq* Festival was a central part of our community's ceremonial life. However, the impact of colonization and the epidemics saw the festival banned for many years until it re-emerged in 1988.

In the 1980s suicide amongst our young people was at troubling levels. Successive government led health campaigns targeted boredom, lack of physical activity and drugs and alcohol and in turn

funded gym programmes, drug and alcohol education programmes and anti-drug T-shirts and caps, believing these were reasons for suicide amongst my generation of youth. The campaigns failed to make an impact on the crisis.

Faced with this unprecedented problem, Iñupiaq leaders convened a special commission that adopted an Iñupiaq approach to the problem and began by speaking with elders and community members. Through this process they found the root cause of the problem to be the mental health of our young people and in particular their sense of disengagement from Iñupiaq identity. Not surprisingly, a century of colonization was having a visible and highly damaging impact on our children.

In response, and following a lengthy period of consultations that neither assumed what the solution would be nor limited people to a deadline, the leaders made the unexpected decision to re-introduce the *Kivgiq* Festival. This didn't just mean redirecting money that had been previously identified for smaller government programmes. It required a holistic response across all levels and all areas of our community. Time was needed with elders, storytelling was rejuvenated, histories were re-told, family connections were strengthened, physical activity in the form of dancing, racing and sports, hunting, sewing, cooking traditions, knowledges and practices were strengthened. A range of traditions focused on Iñupiaq learning and pride for our young people were once again energized.

Because the solution was grounded in who we were as a people and our relationships to each other, our lands and waters and our histories, the *Kivgiq* Festival became self-sustaining once again. It affirmed for us that many of the answers to the trauma inflicted by colonization lay in the strength of our culture and our ability as a people to trust processes that holistically address the root cause of a problem, not just its symptoms, processes that reconnect us to each other and our lands.

Humility and the Future

Despite the violence inflicted on us, our communities have never stopped sharing and never stopped listening. It's a core foundation of our social and economic structure. It's the way we have thrived for so long in such a challenging climate. If our approach of listening and seeking out the root cause of a problem was taken by large industrialized nations, perhaps they could acknowledge that when

they exported (through colonial activity) their model of exploitation into First Nations communities, it required them (as colonizers) to silence and marginalize their own humanity while violently silencing the knowledges and sciences of First Nations people (they could not silence our humanity).

In the process of silencing and oppressing our ways of being, knowing and doing, colonizing nations literally turned their backs on an accumulated knowledge bank which has allowed First Nations people to live sustainably with each other and our environment in our regions for tens of thousands of years. For leaders and policy makers struggling with solutions to climate change, perhaps it will assist them to know that we are still here. We are still living as Iñupiaq people, on Iñupiaq country with understandings of the earth that our people have drawn upon to maintain balance and respect for millennia.

We continue to plan for the future by having the humility to look to our past and understand our missteps today. We are also here resisting, waiting for the leaders and policy makers, who speak down to us, to finally come to us in the spirit of authentic collaboration. Only then can we share our critical and holistic knowledge and understandings to support the design of solutions for global problems facing our people as well as theirs.

Perhaps at some point soon, the world will be in a better position to commence an honest conversation about the climate crisis, its causes and solutions. That conversation will need to include and value the voices of peoples with critical experience and toolkits who have previously been ignored. As my father, and so many other First Nations leaders around the world, say, 'the earth will never lose, she will do what she needs to do. She'll clear the slate and start again'.

The question remains, what are we all willing to do to ensure we have a place on that earth?

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