

Search *Janus Head*

Ways of Knowing

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(All photos by the author.)

I was entranced by the unknownness of where I found myself that summer. But I wanted to know it, learned the Inuit names first. *Maniq* -- peat moss -- was burned for its smoke that keeps mosquitoes away. *Uqaujatsaq* -- Arctic willow buds -- we dipped in seal oil and ate them as snacks taken with hot tea on the melting spring ice. *Kakilanaquitit* -- sweet saxifrage flowers -- we cooked in seal fat on the stony beach, then whistled at the northern lights to make them dance.

Mosesee named the cushiony mounds of tiny mauve, pink and purple flowers *aupilatuguaq* -- moss campion -- and showed me how they grow in expanding circles to protect themselves against harsh, drying Arctic winds. The bursts of purple powder made us laugh as we squeezed the dried husks of *pujuqitaaq* -- puffballs -- as I'd done at home, but here they were smaller and more delicate than in Southern Ontario where I'd first come to know them.

I found new ways to learn about myself, as well. Saw how I was in others' eyes. And how I changed. At first I was *kabloona* or white person. Then I became *merilee* as Inuktitut, the Eskimo language, transformed the English sounds of Marilyn, the name I carried with me. Sometimes I was *pitsulok*, 'one who walks,' from my last name (Walker) and the walkabouts I liked to make exploring this new landscape, searching out berries, mushrooms, waterweeds and new ways of being.

"What is this?" I asked. "And that. What is that?" In time, I discovered there are other ways to learn.

Sleeping on Mountains

With the Rocky Mountains as backdrop and tea and homemade pan bread on her kitchen table in front of us, Sophie Thomas told me how she became a healer. "Each person has a purpose in life," she said. "Some people are good parents, others are good with medicines. I was chosen when I was young to learn about plants and how they can help us. Grandmother sent me to sleep on the edge of a mountain. Alone," she told me, "for three nights. It made me strong."



I too wanted to discover what I might become. I had no grandmother to guide me, but I could go to Ruby Mountain. A mountain became my mentor. A mountain taught me I am my own greatest teacher. I learned to stop a nosebleed with spider web, to soothe a bee sting with the chewed up leaves of willow. When I was thirsty, I bit the juicy green leaves of wild sorrel or the hard black crowberries bears feed on. Mountain cranberries I gathered by the handful, blueberries one at a time, exploding each delicate oval between my teeth and marvelling at the spreading blue-purple stain on my fingertips.



In summer, I gathered pineapple weed for tea and waited for the first frost to turn highbush cranberry tart and sweet. Winter offered starchy bearberries under the snow cover and spruce stems to steep for tea. In spring, I dug camas bulbs like cocoons out of the soft brown earth and waited for the new growth of mountain saxifrage to push itself up through the straw-like debris of last year's growth. Ruby Mountain renewed itself through the seasons, and myself as witness. "Everything has a gift to offer," Sophie told me. Like a teaching, sometimes we are ready to receive it.

Not Looking

"It could help you," he said. "This is a very powerful plant. You could use it." I felt Bob Sam was offering me a gift as he showed me how to harvest Devil's Club for medicine in the Alaskan rain

forest, how to cut off the long stems in early spring before new growth, to scrape off the rough outer bark to reach the green inner bark and its medicine. Some plants he harvests for twenty years and more, taking a few stems at a time and leaving the rest of the plant to renew itself. The shavings he placed carefully in a small paper bag. “When you are ready,” he told me without words, “a plant will reveal itself to you.”



Bob Sam spoke preparing himself to gather medicine, how he puts all bad thoughts out of his mind. That way you can only do good with what the plant offers you. His ancestors would fast before entering the forest. In the old days.

“You have to ask the plant if it can be taken,” he told me. “Speak to it. Ask it for help. Say what you’ll be using it for: ‘I need to make medicine for my family’ or ‘someone is sick.’” And you show respect, recognize the gift the plant can give, its special value. He took a small pouch from his pocket, poured a little corn meal into his open palm, sprinkled it on the ground. Giving something back to the land. Some tobacco, a little sugar, “You can use these, too,” people tell me. “Even spit or a hair from your head will do if a person is poor.” You can say, “This is all I have.” Could a thought or a feeling be a sign of respect, too, I wonder?



Bob Sam spoke of how the forest teaches us what we need to know. “You hear a story,” he said. I thought of stories people tell, and, too, of stories in the landscape. “Sometimes it takes a long time to understand a story. You dream. Dreams are a way things often come to you.” Did I dream of Devil’s Club that night? Dream its long thorny stems swaying in the breeze at the forest edge like tendrils of floating seaweed.

The next morning I walked along a path in the forest searching for Devil’s Club. Wanting so much to find it, to make my medicine. I looked hard and deep into the forest knowing it was all around me, but where?

The next day I returned to look again. This time I stood quietly within myself, inhaling the mushroomy scent of decay and new growth, last year's memories and those of tomorrow. I practiced not looking. Still as stone from the forest's edge, it came to me.

Silences

I watched Mosesee watch the icy landscape unfolding before us. He showed me many things -- to find the buttery yellow whiteness of polar bear at the floe edge, white bear against white ice against white sky. To look through time into the pale blue of old sea ice buried deep below the new clear ice. To drink the fresh, salt-rinsed water that melts into pools on the surface of skin of the Arctic Ocean under the warmth of the spring sun. He taught me much more.



An old man when I met him, Mosesee read the landscape like a poem. In poetry, it's the silences I listen for, the spaces between words where meaning is found. I learned to listen for a moment before candle ice, *illaujaq*, rots away beneath your feet and you vanish without a trace into the shattered sea. To listen for the moment of freezing to death. The moments between. The waiting time.

Memory brings back the ancient image of an Inuk on the winter ice, spear raised above the seal's breathing hole. Feet on fur to warm the cold, he waits through morning and afternoon, through yesterday and tomorrow. Waits for the flicker of the tiny feather floating in the life-giving water that signals the seal surfacing through the icy slush. Waits for the moment when the seal breaks the thin skin of surface tension between water and air, between life and death. Waits, releases breath...



Amassalik Inuit of East Greenland use the same word for "breathe" and "make poetry." The stem means the life force... I want poems like this. In the moment poems. Poems like deep meditations. Poems in the resting place between breaths. In the moment of stillness before the breath releases.

Poems like Mosesse and the landscape unfolding before us,

on the edge of this ice
forest
mountain
on the edge of this moment
listening for the silence
for the spaces between

rock, air, the surface of my skin
between words, and ways of knowing,
between worlds.