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Deep Patience or "The Elements of Success in the High Arctic"

by Tim Pearson

"Deep Patience," or the Inuit word "quinuituq," is a unique Arctic concept. It originally described the long wait at a seal hole for the prey to surface, the waiting for a lead of open water out on the ice pack to close or the stealthy wait and then sudden crash of a white bear through the roof of a seal den. Literally it means long waiting, prepared for a sudden event. Or as Father Michael Oleksa pithily once put it, "It's waiting hours for one second."

What's the connection to wealth creation in Alaska? Well, if you're an entrepreneur and you suddenly just spotted the perfect location for your new latte stand, you've probably just felt "quinuituq." If you're a researcher who plows faithfully through the Federal Register and you just spotted the perfect RFP for your company, you've just exercised deep patience. If you're a corporate rainmaker who's mastered Alaska's power breakfast, lunch and dinner circuits, you've got deep patience.

There are six elements to Inuit deep patience: savvy, stamina, silence, speed, sharing, and survival.

First, savvy -- you've got to know where to hunt. If you're after ringed seal (nattiq), you've got to know that they don't go much further than 12 miles off shore and they like the edges of shore-fast ice. Once freeze-up occurs, they make small breathing holes thorough the thin ice of cracks in the six foot thick sea ice. A seal regularly maintains a line of breathing holes (aglu, plural: agluit) by blowing out from the underside of the ice, pushing each hole into a small dome about the size of the tip of one's thumb. One challenge is detecting a hole (dogs help); a second is figuring out how frequently it is used. Black, open water suggests a recent visit. Cloudy, whitish, icy water indicates an older visit. And just like the various types of snow, there are various types of seal holes: a one nostril hole (illuinaqqumituq), a hole that fits the whiskers (umirrumituq) and a hole large enough for an entire head (niaqqumituq).

Second, stamina - assume a standing position at the downwind side of the hole. Of course, that means the Arctic wind will be in your face. Don't move. Hold the five to six pound harpoon in one hand for up to 14 hours. Listen for the sound of water rushing up the conical hole ahead of the seal. A whoosh means the seal is exhaling.

Third, silence - above all, be still and maintain silence. Sound travels all too well underwater and a seal below will hear the creak of feet on the snow-packed ice. This is where the traditional belief that learning best occurs by quiet observation rather than noisy questioning comes into play. It's easier to maintain silence if one has practiced silence.

Fourth, speed - you've got a fraction of a second to act once the seal exhales. Act or lose. Your choice. To freeze at the moment of action, literally means to freeze.

Fifth, sharing - you don't "get" the seal. They're too smart. The seal gives itself to you. You in turn share the gift with others. You give your first seal to your "sanariarruk" -- the one who dressed you when you were born. Later seals you share with your family and the community. Everyone gets a share.

Sixth, survival - the Arctic's First People well understood the connection between community survival and risk diversification. Twelve hunters from a community go out and perhaps only two are successful, but everyone shares in the success. Next time it will be two other hunters who are successful. The highest status goes to the providers who share the most.

They were wise, those First People.

Life is easier now in some ways. You don't have to stand for fourteen hours over an aglu facing into the wind in order to have food and heat and light at home. But the value of strength of character is no less. My Yup'ik friends in the Y-K Delta are always reminding me that life is about leadership - "Upterrlainarluta" - "always getting ready."

What can we use deep patience for today? Oil and gas development is about deep patience. (Strikes are strikes but only come after long waiting.) Global logistics and air cargo hubs take vision. Great universities are built student by student and professor by professor. A Legislature with wise deliberators and a series of Governors with vision, courage and compassion is the result of decades of civic engagement on the part of thousands of citizens.

Personally, I can see putting in 40 more years, on top of the past thirteen, supporting a state-wide network of emerging and experienced leaders.

And for you? What's worth waiting for in your world? And for how long are you willing to exercise deep patience?

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