

## The Cry of the Loon: Mysterious, Mournful, Remembering Place

by Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley

*Sharing Our Pathways*, Vol. 4, Issues 2 & 3

*Waqaa*, greetings to each and everyone of you. Some of you may well be asking yourselves, why have I chosen the *tunutellek* as my subject for this occasion? The Yupiaq name means “that which is packing something.” Indeed, the loon is carrying a heavy burden.

Wherever the loon exists, there are Native people, and you will have many loon stories that are mystical and magical in their content. Among them is the story of the blind boy who is made to see by the loon diving into the water with the boy on its back. This is repeated three times. In each dive and emergence, the boy could see a little clearer, and on its third emergence, the boy could see clearly. The loon helped the boy to see, likewise, it can help us to understand ourselves and see our connection to Mother Earth today.

Listen to the call of the loon. Its call is God-given through nature. It is its own language and understood by others of its kind and other creatures. Only we, with our ability to think and rationalize, do not understand because we listen only with the mind, not with mind and heart well sprinkled with intuition. To some it is eerie, as if some bad thing is about to happen. Maybe an *alangguk*, an apparition or ghost of some kind is about to appear. It conjures up many thoughts that are not based on “what is” but on “what if.” This is the fear that most of us face as a Native people, especially when thinking about changing education. “What if” the educators, legislators and powers that be do not believe and think that this could be done. But regardless, we must take those steps necessary to change education so that it takes into consideration, in fact, makes an educational system based on our own tribal worldviews. When thought of in that context,

then it includes our Native languages, ways of generating knowledge, research, ways of making things and ways for using them respectfully. Our Alaska Native languages come from the land, are derived from the land. It is the language of the land that makes our Native people live in harmony with Nature. According to the Muskogee Cree, Bear Heart, harmony is a tolerance, a forgiving, a blending. This is what our Native languages allow us to do. Our Native words come from the creatures and things of Mother Earth naming themselves, defining themselves through action words—that's reality! Nature is our teacher. Information and rationality are a small segment of knowing and learning. In the use of our Native languages, we come to live life intimately because we are enmeshed in it rather than looking at it from a distance through a microscope or telescope. It then behooves that we relearn our languages and learn to live close to nature to regain our health as a Native people. When we have that vision and goal, and work toward it, then we will have harmony; we will have tolerance; we will forgive; and we will again blend into our world. We will be using our five senses and intuition to learn about our place. The loon never lost its spiritual vision. It has a love for life, its environment and its creator. Its education was from Mother Earth for the heart, for it to become creative and to know how to live in its community, its habitat.

The loon still gets messages from its unconscious on new thoughts or solutions to problems. We, as human beings, have cluttered up our conscious minds with information and rational thinking, so that our world of dreams is no longer sought through meditation, vision questing, fasting and looking deep into the silence within us for direction. Not only have we become socio-politico-economic dependents, but we depend on outside sources to take care of our problems whether it's individual, family or community. You see, the loon looks into its inner ecology knowing that no one else can do that for it. It knows that it is incumbent upon itself. In order for us to receive guidance and direction for our lives, we must relearn what the loon does naturally. We must look into ourselves where power and strength lie and tap into it to begin to address our own problems.

Another strength of the loon, is that it teaches and nurtures its young to live as a loon. It does not require that someone else do the educating. The loon develops the loon worldview of its young closely connected to others and its place. As it migrates from place to place, it remembers and appreciates the diversity and beauty of Nature. It nurtures its offspring to become independent yet knowing its dependence on the abundance of Nature to succor its needs. It teaches its young to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This is true love; this is unconditional love that we need in this world. A love for self, a love for others and a love for place giving one a sense of responsibility to take care of oneself, to care for others and the environment that one lives

in. The loon's cry is remembering a place that was harmonious, full of beauty and diversity that Nature so loves. This is heart talk! This is science—knowing place.

Very much like our Native people, the loon's life is not all roses and peace. The loon has a few problems, such as taking off. It is very much like the Wright brothers in their early experiments. The little homemade engine revs up, but has just enough power for it to barely to get off the ground. Just as the under-powered plane, the loon frantically flaps its wings and seemingly runs across the water's surface. Once in a while, the loon will crash onto the tundra. But, it crawls back into the lake somehow and tries again. We, as a Native people, are testing our wings and power! If we find that some of our ideas do not work, we need to go back and try again, maybe with a different approach and tools. We must not be overly ambitious by overplaying our knowledge and abilities, but recognize our limitations as human beings. We must do that which we know we can succeed at first, then progress to more difficult tasks. And, if we fail, we must NEVER GIVE UP!

The sad fact about this precious bird is that it is losing ground in its efforts to survive. Our Canadian friends look upon it with great respect, so much so, that it is on their one- and two-dollar coins. They are called the "loonie" and "toonie". It is a known fact that the loon's numbers are growing smaller at a fast rate in Canada. There is a problem that is so ominous and insidious that it is overwhelming the loon. It is not of its own making. It is human-made pollution consisting of chemical, biological, nuclear and noise which is destroying its habitat. It is we, humans, who are destroying its habitat and, unfortunately, as we destroy its habitat we are destroying ourselves in the process. The loon may well ask, "What was the question that makes technology the answer in the first place? Who asked it and when?" Technology is inherently good and is the product of human rationality. But, unfortunately, it has laid aside morality and ethics. Take for example, the computer. Many think it's the answer for all our needs. It is speedy and answers questions with facts the human has fed into it. I say use it sparingly as a tool. It encourages individualism often to the point of isolationism. The excessive user wants to be alone with a stupid machine. If you feed it garbage, you get garbage in return. It takes away clear thinking, problem-solving skills and above all, removes common sense.

Modern technology wants to take and take, to make things without giving back. It wants to cut into Mother Earth to remove its natural resources. It wants to make people want more of its products. In so doing, indigenous people, creatures, plants and landforms are sometimes no barrier to the Eurocentric concepts of progress and development. They are merely removed as detritus and, in the process, destroy a people and their place. The

loon's mournful cry is in recognition of this needless destruction that is taking place by bigger and better technological machines of devastation.

The mournful cry of the loon is much aware of its dwindling food sources, the inability of some of its eggs to hatch and its members succumbing to poisons and new diseases. It recognizes that to not have children, to not have family, to not have a community, is to be scattered, to be falling apart. Many of our Native families are falling apart. I recognize that there are healthy Native families in the villages. I would say that these healthy families are surrounded by and witness to a holocaust of pain and misery. Our villages are, in essence, communities in name only. They are often not working together for the common good as in the old days. The unhealthy and dysfunctional families have youngsters seven, eight or nine years old who are raising and taking care of their younger siblings. Why should I worry about these young children acting as parents? Because these youngsters are missing an important aspect of their young lives—that of being a child! A child to be loved by parents, to be nurtured and taken care of by parents, to play as a child, to talk as a child, to imagine as a child. Oh, the yearning of the child just to be a child! Many children miss this growing up phase.

As if this was not enough, we allow video games, movies and television to become the babysitters while we go out and party, play bingo, gamble and do things that make us sicker. While the children are viewing and doing these things, they are seeing killing, cheating, lying, men beating women and children, all kinds of sex, adult language and all other undesirable aspects of life. The mournful cry of the loon is reminding us of the time when there were secrets from children, things that were not to be known by them until they were considered ready. Today, there are no secrets in the modern media. Go out on the playground, a school party, or anywhere youngsters are gathered. Listen to their language! You will hear a lot of foul language. The language that the youngsters use is an indicator of how bad the situation has become. There is no respect for the parents, teachers, elders and most certainly of other young people. We see children having children, children killing children, children killing elders, children committing suicide, children dropping out of school, children without hope—sad children. What a sad state for us to be in! These states of affairs contribute to the loss of childhood. We must gain control of what the children learn, see and do. We do this by regaining control of our own lives. We control this by turning off the television during dinner time so that heart talk can take place. Heart talk is kind, gentle talk that makes one want to be polite to everyone and everything around them. This talk allows members to know each other, what their likes and dislikes are, to know of problems they are having with friends, siblings and school. It allows the family to find out what they would like to see change in the home

and why. This is where a family that loves and talks together becomes stronger because they know each other, love and care for one another. This is family.

The loon does not blame anyone even though its environment is rife with problems and pollution is beyond its control. Its mournful call reminds us that we, as humans, must do our part to regenerate and reciprocate to Nature. We, the Native people, must quit blaming others for our problems. When we blame others, we are saying that someone else should take care of the problem and deal with our feelings about the situation. We don't like what has been happening in the schools, so we blame the state, district and teachers. We are saying to them "take care of the problem" and also "take care of my hurt and confused feelings about my own education. Please, heal me." Why should we continue to do this? Why should we continue to say how confused and mixed up we are by the new civilization that has come to our villages? So now we have frame houses that are poorly insulated, built on stilts and expensive to maintain. But we are "educated" because we no longer live in sod houses. We have snowmobiles instead of dog teams that can often save our lives. We have flush toilets with Lysol cleaners that empty into an unhealthy lagoon, thereby making it unnecessary for us to go outdoors in all kinds of weather, where Nature can take care of natural wastes in a natural way. But, we are educated. We have antibiotics and hormone-laced hamburgers instead of smoked dry fish which is more healthful. We use toilet paper which kills trees instead of sphagnum moss which prevents rash and spread of germs. Boy, are we educated! So well educated to think our Native languages and cultures are no longer useful. This is what the loon is mourning. Why have you, the Native people, given up so easily? Giving up has been a very costly venture to us as a Native people. But, we are educated.

The loon's standards of life and making a living are impeccable, thus allowing it to live successfully for many thousands of years. Its basic standard is respect—a respect for the Greater Being, spirits, others' rights to live a life that fits their needs and a respect for the environment. It is taught all aspects of its place by its parents using all five senses. The young are taught how to play; taught the ritual of swimming, diving and making its call; taught how to select a nesting place; taught the art of making a nest; taught to appreciate the lifeforms within its place and taught to live a life that is interacting with all that is around it. Nature is science. It knows that it is a loon and always will remember that. Yes, its standards are simple and intertwined leading to a life that is full of meaning and direction.

For those of us that are indigenous or Native people, we must resurrect our ways of recognizing and paying homage to the Ellam Yua spirits and Nature. When we regain our

spirituality, we will again learn to laugh from our hearts and play because “those who know how to play can easily leap over the adversaries of life. And one who knows how to sing and laugh never brews mischief” (an Iglulik proverb.) When we awake at dawn and look at the sun rising and life begins to stir again, this is mysterious. The loon is telling us of this mystery of life—its mysterious connection to us. This is sacred. When we begin to understand this, we will begin to change our relationship to our environment. We will begin to experience a need for a new existence. I am happy to state that among the Alaska Native people, the Yupiat have striven for and are heading for a new existence! We have many Yupiat Elders and others that have become teachers for all of us, and all point to the same direction—a new consciousness for life. A new consciousness that is vibrantly traditional, full of truth, beauty, health, happiness and love. These five attributes of life become the foundations to the question that each and everyone of us will ask ourselves as to the type of life that we want to pursue. As we put this into practice, we will become the model of existence for now and in the future.

In this contemporary world of chaos, we can create our own reality. We can re-create ourselves as we want to be. We have the power within us to do this. We have three things that will help us to do this. First, we have our past through myths, stories, rituals and ceremonies. We can draw from them that which will help us reconstruct, and dispense with those that will not be of help to us in our efforts. Secondly, we have our imagination and ability to see what we would like to be in the future. In the future, what will we look like? What will we live in? How will we make our living? What kinds of things will we possess? How will we recognize the spiritual? And, lastly, we have our rational, thinking minds that react to things around us and thus enable us to connect with things as they are now. We know what we are, know what others think of us, know how we try to make a living, know how the federal and state governments work against us, and know how we react to negative as well as the few positive things that happen to us. Knowing these time and thought spirals can help us to reconstruct our reality and ourselves. It is time that we make songs about alcohol and drugs telling of their power over us, telling us it is now time for us to give up and be released from their use, and give up or relinquish our emotional ties to these destructive elements. If we merely release these from our lives, we will return to it. So it is absolutely necessary that we give up our emotional ties to it—I do it because it makes me feel good, allows me to talk and mix with people. This is an emotional tie that will get you back to it.

The loon reminds us that its standards for life are high, and so should ours. In looking at the federal and state standards, I get confused as to the real meaning of them. Perhaps it’s the fragmented and convoluted approach by fields of study that make this so. It does not

show me a need for a change in education. There is an old Chinese saying that goes something like this: When there is someone pointing at the moon, only the idiot looks at the finger! These Eurocentric standards require that we look at the content of the various fields of study. They tell us what our students are purportedly to know at the end of secondary school. Content, thus information accumulation and reasoning, seems to be of overriding importance. As I've said before, information and rationality are a very small part of learning. There is a missing ingredient that fails to give direction and a wholeness to the standards. This is not to say that they are useless, but can be if left alone.

The needed ingredient (strange attractors) are the Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools. These say to me that there needs to be a change in education, not only schooling. Schooling is that which happens in the structure called the school. Education is that which happens within and without the family, school and community. The latter is all inclusive. In reading and thinking about the standards, I get the distinct feeling that there is a need to change the way that we teach, the things that we teach about, the materials we use, how we measure growth and development and where things are taught. These standards behoove that something be done to accommodate the Native thought-worlds, their worldviews. The loon would desire this for its survival and ours. We are now on that pathway.

In conclusion, the cry of the loon is encouraging us to balance our physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual selves to begin to live lives that feel just right, walking peacefully and expressing it to others in our own Native languages. *Piurciqukut Yuluta pitallketuluta*. We will become people living a life that feels just right. *Quyana*.