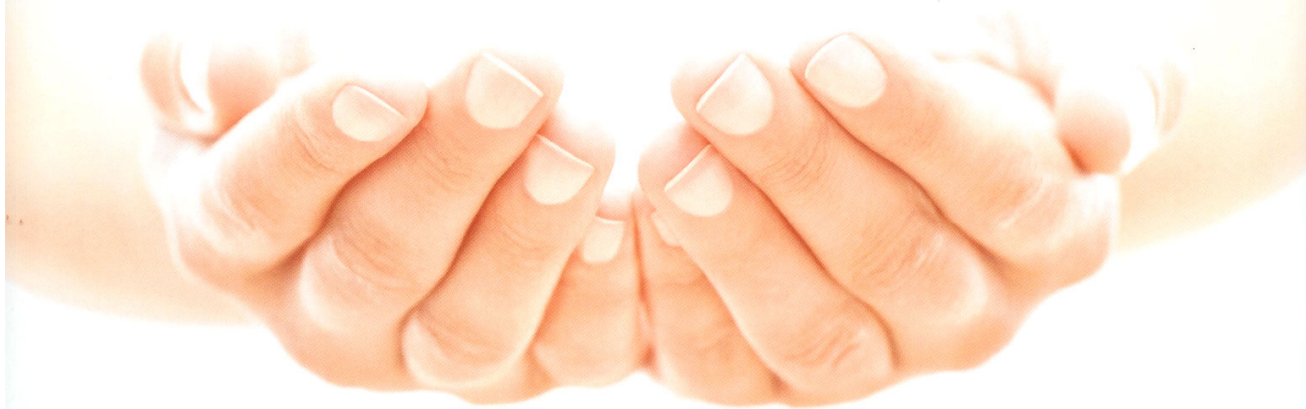


GIVING

Outside the Box



Traditions of giving and living the good life

BY LESLIE HSU OH
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

At the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, if you relax on the benches facing seven 56 x 32 inch plasma screens in the Living Our Cultures, Sharing our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska exhibit, you might hear Alice Rearden (Cucuaq Aluskak) speak about *ella*, awareness, on the Yup'ik video. Growing up in Napakiak, her Elders taught her “that if you are out walking and see a piece of driftwood sticking out of the mud, you should pull it out and turn it over so that the muddy part can dry. That piece of wood is alive and aware, and it will feel gratitude for your kindness.”

Her features are delicate but when she speaks, her voice is laced with the weight of more than 12 years of wisdom gleaned from serving as lead translator for Calista Elders Council. The video pans to a scene of fish hanging on a dry rack while Rearden says off-screen: “We always grew up with that sense, of not putting yourself first or above others. Giving gifts to people, those kinds of, you know, unselfish gestures that you do for people — it will come back in turn.”



CHUCK CHOI / SMITHSONIAN ARCTIC STUDIES CENTER

Elders and youth answer “Who we are” in a video display at the Anchorage Museum’s “Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska” exhibit.

The concept of giving repeats in exponential ways as Elders and youth answer the question of “Who we are” in 10 (Athabascan, Eyak, Haida, Iñupiaq, Tlingit, Tsimshian, Unangan, Sugpiaq, Yup’ik and Saint Lawrence Island Yup’ik) approximately two-minute video vignettes looping across seven monitors.

On the screen farthest to the left, Paul Asicksik Jr. says in the Iñupiaq video, “One thing that we were taught as young boys is not to lock your eyes with the animals. And the way that I understand that now is that’ll give the animal a chance to dive back down into the water. But when this happened to me and when that seal came up out of the water, a thought came into my head. And it asked me, ‘Will you waste?’ And I thought, ‘No, I’m not going to waste this. I’ll put this to good use.’ And then after I had that thought, he turned his head, and he gave me the shot that I needed to take him. So, I felt that he actually gave himself to me.”

A few minutes later, David Boxley in the Tsimshian video, on the screen farthest to the right, talks about the potlatch and how “you have to gift every witness ... you’ve got to feed everybody. And you have to feed them very well. More than they need. So they take some home with them, you know, as another gift.”

Before you have time to digest that, Rosita Worl says into the screen to Boxley’s left, “In Tlingit culture, our wealth and success are considered using whatever wealth you’ve accumulated and distributing that to the opposite clan, giving it away.”

This 100-foot-long video installation is where I like to hang out with my kids on the

weekends. It’s my way of simulating the old days, when daily, children could gather at the foot of an Elder after dinner and listen to their stories. At a minimum, I hope that my children can understand the importance of giving, unmarred by the Western expectation for something in return.

Share, gift, confer and place

Athabascans are careful to not use the word “giving.” My mentor, Wilson Justin, tribal administrator of Cheesh’na Tribal Council, shares the following knowledge that is copyrighted by his council. Over a cup of coffee, he leans in as if he is going to tell me a secret and says, “It’s a pretty big subject and hard to talk about in any great depth.”

“First, ‘giving’ does not fare well in our language,” he chuckled. “We use sharing, gifting, conferring and placing. There was a structural sense in how these terms came into being. We learn about sharing before we ever got to gifting. The value of sharing is to show fealty. You are pledging loyalty to your clan or tribe. It tells everybody that you are marking your place in the community by sharing. The firstborns and the youngest were directed to learn the most about sharing.”

Justin grew up at a time when the firstborn, like himself, was often placed with distant families who had no young men of age who could hunt, trap, catch fish or make trails. Sometimes the placement could last as long as two years.

Howard Luke describes in his book, “My Own Trail,” how he often skipped school to cut wood and pack water for an Elder.

His mother would encourage him with these words, “One of these days them old people will give you their wisdom.” Luke explains that “people shouldn’t think about themselves. You got to think about the next person and that’s the way it should be. When you’re doing that, you’re helping yourself.”

Justin runs his hand through his peppered hair and continues, “Gifting is the mature thing. Gifting is exclusively a potlatch law. It is meant to undo a harm or wrong or forgive a breach of protocol. Gifting is misused today. Now it is in the category of sharing, showing gaalee-ya or respect as opposed to developing a way to heal the hurt or correct a wrong.

“Confer comes in at a young age, where you get a name for your first kill and you share it with the Elders and the community. Conferring is putting a name on a person or an issue of stature. For instance, I use the example of the firstborn being placed with another family for an extended period of time to fill in a loss. At some point, that firstborn’s son or grandson will be recognized for his father or grandfather’s deeds. A name would be conferred upon him. A recognition of a duty done well.” Justin won’t tell me how many names he’s been conferred in his lifetime, but he hints mysteriously that it’s all over the place.

“Placing is a way to acknowledge boundaries and food sources. It’s almost geographical in the Western sense, where you are working off landmarks, whereas we work off tribal marriage and tribal intermarriage agreements. It’s very difficult to translate into English. Oral storytelling is driven by sacredness and tribal

placement (where the tribe is, where the tribe was and where the tribe may be) so when you talk about the idea of sharing, gifting, conferring and placing, you are talking about a big, big world."

He leans back and laughs. I wait for him to finish his coffee before asking what we can do to practice and teach these concepts today.

Justin takes the time to find the right words: "Obviously it has to continue because it has value in other aspects like solidarity, sense of identification, and developing family ties/kinships. We can never capture what these things were so there is a certain sense of sadness. But on the other hand the new generation has something to hold onto, even if what was can never be. Learn to sing, speak, dance because there is such a generation gap between the generation that practiced these things and the generation that is utilizing them now. My own thought is that we can preserve the memory of our traditions but we can't put them into practice. And if we teach it, it just adds confusion."

How to practice

Working with cultural anthropologist Ann Fienup-Riordan, Alice Rearden, who is now 35, translates books such as "Ellavut: Our Yup'ik World and Weather," the ninth in a series produced by Calista Elders Council to document Yup'ik oral traditions. Some of the qanruyutet, words of wisdom, gathered over 10 years from Yup'ik Elders bear a resemblance to Justin's concept of sharing: "They say that those who are capable must help those less fortunate through sharing food and doing chores for them. We were admonished: 'Even though an old woman wants to pay you, you do not receive it.' When an elderly woman or man is given something or helped, she is extremely grateful and thanks you with enthusiasm. And they give the person who helped them something beneficial, thinking of something in their minds that will aid him positively in his life."

"Yup'ik discussions of the ethics of sharing describe its consequences in terms of its nonmaterial return — the grateful thoughts it elicits ... Today, sharing knowledge is as critical as sharing food in both the transfer and transformation of Yup'ik moral standards. Admonitions to act with compassion and restraint remain foundational not only in Yup'ik interpersonal interaction but in their relations with their environment."

Rearden says that "there are so many resources today like the works that we've been doing in my job. Nowadays, you have to be really creative. For instance, if you're in a city and you have never grown up with any Yup'ik traditions of sharing at all, what kind of advice would you give someone who wants to learn? Read into it. You get a lot out of it. And also to ask family members, that's the biggest thing for me. If I don't know something then I always ask."

Thank goodness for Rearden's courage in asking questions. One of the ways she carries on *tuvqakiyaraq*, the custom of sharing, is

to keep her Facebook page updated with teachings she's learned from Elders. "It's a Yup'ik thing that if you don't have anything to give, even a word of advice is significant, like raising children or how a couple is supposed to treat one another or anything having to do with living a good life."

I coax the humble Rearden, who nearly did not agree to be interviewed because she felt there were others more knowledgeable than herself on this subject, to offer more advice on how we can practice *tuvqakiyaraq* today: "Sometimes, I feel apprehensive or afraid to ask when I don't know something, because so many of our cultural traditions are being lost today, especially for somebody who didn't grow up in the village and didn't have a chance to see those things: Is it appropriate to adopt something? Or live by something you have only read about? I don't know. I think we have to be really creative and learn as much as we can from our Elders and teach as much as we can and we have to show others that these traditions are not old. They are relevant. People are following them today. They are good traditions. They make people feel good inside. I think the best thing to do is to show people how healthy they make people inside. How much of a wonderful ..."

She pauses, her enthusiasm catching up with her words.

"I mean, the biggest part of carrying on traditions of sharing or gifting is that they are good for our soul and happiness and the culture."

Rearden's boss, Mark Miisaq John, who was born in Nightmute and grew up in Toksook Bay on Nelson Island, illustrates this with: "Elders taught us that by giving we are placing what is going to be helpful to us in the future. It may be having success in future hunting and fishing, having what we need available to us when we need it, better health for us and our family, and keeping us close to other people."

"I am very happy to say that it is the one thing that is still very strong in the villages. It is very important today, because it helps people look after each other and it keeps people close to each other. The act of giving in the villages is one of the values that goes along with the practice of the subsistence way of life. Animals give themselves to those that are fortunate to catch them. I would encourage the people in the villages to continue to share whatever they are fortunate to catch and continue to teach the cultural values that go hand in hand with 'subsistence way of life.' Subsistence teachings are very important, because they teach us to pay attention to and to be respectful to everything that is around you."

John tells me that the moose hunting season is a great example of *tuvqakiyaraq*: "The people are sharing resources to go out hunting and helping and looking out for each other while they are doing it. Fathers, grandfathers, uncles and other relatives are teaching their children how to hunt and when they return home with their catches, food is shared with everybody, especially the Elders and those that cannot provide for themselves."

Rearden tells me that even after John moved to Anchorage, he manages to go seal hunting in Whittier and whaling in Bristol Bay. He constantly brings back subsistence foods from villages and generously shares them with his family and friends.

In Anchorage, the sharing of subsistence foods has become the warp thread weaving together Native and non-Native communities. While dip netting I always collect fish heads from non-Native neighboring fishermen and deliver them to Elders who I work with in town. During holiday seasons, the post offices are bustling with ice boxes packed with subsistence foods that are being mailed to the Lower 48.

How to teach

Rearden is a mother of three: Kyle, 13, Kayla, 11, and Christopher, 4. Rearden traded with me ideas on how to teach our kids *tuvqakiyaraq* in an urban setting. Rearden grew up "feeling shame to get more than someone else. Whenever I was asked to share, I always gave the other person a bigger piece. I would cut a candy in half and be ashamed to take the bigger piece."

She raises her children, who were all born in Anchorage, with these ideas: "The more you give the more you get back. If we are stingy, like if you don't share your toys, then it will break right away. When you give, it will come back to you. Your selfless act is always rewarded. They see that I don't hold back when it comes to helping in any situation. I hope they watch me and observe what I do."

Because it is hard to keep traditions like *tuvqakiyaraq* in the city, Rearden goes out of her way to share food. She often hosts feasts where she cooks all day, serving her most precious subsistence foods, making sure her kids see that she is serving her last bag of salmonberries.

She says, "it's just enough for them to see. I am always talking to them and explaining the reasons behind sharing, the reason why it's important to give to others and have compassion for others."

When family and friends from rural areas visit, Rearden always takes them shopping. She refuses to accept gas money even though she is a single mom who works full-time and lives far out-of-town.

Sometimes the children get tired of chauffeuring folks to Wal-Mart or Costco. Her son Kyle asks her, "Why do you give these people rides?"

She laughs before answering, "It's our way of giving. They don't easily get store bought goods. I do it out of compassion."

Kyle persists. "Even if you are completely poor, do you still give away everything you have?"

Rearden nods.

For Kyle's first catch, Rearden threw an *uqiquq*, a throwing party to celebrate a milestone. Kyle had to give away the first duck he ever caught while Rearden bought and made gifts and invited all the ladies from the community. Last week, she took her 4-year-

old, Christopher, berry picking at Flattop Mountain. On the way home, she stopped by a friend's house and made sure that he gave away all the berries he picked. "I am thinking of his future. I want him to be provided with more in the future."

Rearden also taught her children nuances of *tuvqakiyaraq*, such as the generosity exhibited by namesakes. She says, "When I was small, we used to do something similar to Secret Santa at my church. One time, my name was drawn by my namesake's uncle. We were all in the church and it was packed. I was 9 or 10 and they would say somebody's name and carry a gift to that person. When my name was called, I received the largest box. My two cousins sitting by me dropped their mouths in amazement."

Inside the box, Rearden pulled out pants, shirts, a coat, toothbrush, socks, gloves, enough clothes to dress her from head-to-toe. Her grandmother made sure she understood that the generous gift was given to her because of who she was named after.

Tuvqakiyaraq can also manifest in offerings of food and water to the dead or animals that someone hopes to catch. Sometimes the offering is done at a feast, where the dead join in the festivities. Other times *aviuqaqsaraq*, a way of offering food and water, were placed on the land. Rearden didn't grow up with these traditions herself but she plans to incorporate them into her routine. For example, when she goes berry picking, before she allows her kids to pick anything, she shows them how to take a pinch of their provisions and put it on the ground and pour some water on the land and ask her ancestors to provide them with berries.

By sharing a little food and water with the dead, Rearden explains that the ancestors will return the favor by providing whatever the person is requesting "because the people who are dead can't easily get food and water so when they get a small amount of that, it's a huge thing to them. They receive it as a great, great amount. You also don't have to do that only for requesting something but also as a way to show love for someone. You want them to be happy in the next life."

By the time I finish talking to Rearden, John and Justin, I am saturated with the complexities and importance of sharing, gifting, conferring and placing. I hope that I can distill these values to my children as well as Rearden has. When I ask her daughter, Kayla, what she understands about giving, she says, "When you give to others don't expect to get something back. Whenever you give to people who don't have a lot, even if you don't have a lot, if you share what you have with them, if they need it more than you, you will be repaid with better things in the future when you don't expect it." ■

Leslie Hsu Oh (www.lesliehsuoh.com) is a frequent contributor. Her essay "Between the Lines" was listed as a Notable Essay in The Best American Essays 2010. She can be reached at lhsu@post.harvard.edu.

First Alaskans • December 2012/January 2013



Unique Alaskan Gifts

- Hand-knitted by over 200 Eskimo knitters
- Exclusive Qiviut garments in Alaskan village patterns
- Will not shrink
- Eight times warmer than wool






OOMINGMAK
Downtown Location • Corner of 6th & H
Little brown house with musk ox mural
604 H Street, Dept. FAM, Anchorage, AK 99501
(907) 272-9225 • (888) 360-9665 • www.qiviut.com



Good people make great lawyers.

Rob Schmidt
Homeowner Association, Condominium and Real Estate Law

To be a great lawyer in Alaska, you first need to understand Alaska. We're part of this state, and the business and public entities that work for its people. Whether it's mergers and acquisitions, real estate, government, Native Corporations or finance, business is our business.

- We have the talent you're looking for in an attorney, and the experience you need to succeed. Simply put, we know Alaska.

LANDYE BENNETT
BLUMSTEIN LLP
ATTORNEYS

Anchorage 907.276.5152
landye-bennett.com

Simply Great Lawyers. Alaska ■ Oregon