Being:
A Psychology of Space

Amidha K. Porter

Post Office Box 127

King Cove, Alaska 99612

(907) 497-2878

e-Mail: chishtia@alaska.net

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In my life, there came a time when I found that I had run out of meaning to assign to the life I had led until then. As my husband felt similarly, we concocted an adventure: we would take our profession, psychology, into a place unheard of, where we could found a new, personal psychology of of Being--and, hopefully, make a meaningful contribution to Being for the people in that place. When I say *Being,* I use the word in the Heideggerian sense, as explicated by Hofstadter (with apologies to all those of my professors who have accused me of coming into Heidegger, theoretically a purely Western philosopher, through the portal of Jung:

> ...this means to exist as a human Being in an authentic relationship as mortal to other mortals, to earth and sky, to the divinities present or absent, to things and plants and animals; it means, to let each of these be--to let it presence in openness, in the full appropriateness of its nature--and to hold oneself open to its Being, recognizing it and responding to it appropriately in one's own Being, the way in which one oneself goes on, lives; and then, perhaps, in this ongoing life one may hear the call of the language that speaks of the Being of all these Beings and respond to it in a mortal language that speaks of what it hears. (1971, p. x)

It must have been kismet, because soon my husband received a job offer to act as a clinician in the clinic of a tiny fishing village on the Alaskan Peninsula, just above the Aleutian Chain. Shortly after that, my resume, also, was requested, as another staff member had resigned; and both of us were promptly hired, to be the sole providers of mental health services in that village of 750 people. What convinced us that this was the place to go was that neither of us had ever heard of such an area of the world, and the word *Aleut* was only vaguely familiar, as a descriptive term for a people who no longer existed as a tribal entity. Accordingly, we moved ourselves, our (then) two dogs and our nine-year-old daughter away

from the Pittsburgh suburbs and traveled across the country to Seattle. From there we flew, first, by jet to Anchorage, and then by a smaller "bush" plane to that village. From the beginning of that journey, I was compelled to write about the inward meaning of the odyssey taking place as we were transplanted in geographical terms to that unmapped village, and did so in a series of e-mail posts to friends:

> . . . Somewhere along the line--probably when we began to have children, for many of us!--we began to slow down, cut our hair, apply for Mastercard and go back to school.... and David and I were no different from our friends. In some ways our lives began to be a test of our realization, and part of that, for me, was confronting the knowledge that, in my quest for the mastery of solidity, I had lost my spontaneity. We as a family became more and more aware of that over the last few years, and finally grew restive enough to take the offer of jobs as mental health clinicians on the Alaskan Peninsula, in a tiny fishing village in a part of the word we'd never seen or even been near. (Author, unpublished communication, 1996)

The impulse to stop holding still seemed a true one as we began to experience, as the miles went by, an upsurge of renewed vitality:

> There is nothing so energizing as upsetting old patterns, moving in unknown directions all on a hunch, one I must admit was motivated more by desperation than intuition, initially. All in all, this "feels" right. I've been waiting for that feeling. (Author, unpublished communication, 1996)

Arriving in a city and a land that disclosed an eerie resemblance that only magnified its less-than-even and unapologetic difference from the tame, settled places I had left, I found the long-suppressed poet in me re-emerging, and I often thought of a book I had read in college, a book by Gretel Erlich, called **The Solace**

of Open Spaces. (Erlich, 1985) Her book was the reflection that arose out of her experience with the land and the people of Wyoming, in some ways an equivalent barren and lonely landscape which revealed to her dimensions and truths of Being that sounded very similar to the ones I was seeking. Her story was a kind of meditation of loneliness, despair, loss and, ultimately, healing: a healing that took place in ways inaccessible to a more "sclerosed" mind:

> Beginning in 1976, when I went to Wyoming to make a film, I had the experience of waking up not knowing where I was, whether I was a man or a woman, or which toothbrush was mine. I had suffered a tragedy and made a drastic geographical and cultural move fairly baggageless, but I wasn't losing my grip. As Jim Bridger is reported to have said, "I wasn't lost, I just didn't know where I was for a few weeks." What I *had* lost (at least for a while) was my appetite for the life I had left: city surroundings, old friends, familiar comforts. It had occurred to me that comfort was only a disguise for discomfort; reference points, a disguise for what will always change. (Erlich, 1985, p. *ix*)

There is a healing, and perhaps a potential transformation, which takes place in the leaving behind of limitedness, whether from one's own point of view, of the geography of one's habitual surroundings, or even in the sacrificing of association with one's customary acquaintances. This writer came to Wyoming to make a film at the same time that her lover was dying. In her anguish at the imminent loss that was beyond her control, she found a psychic medicine in the vast spaces of a country and a people with whom she was completely unfamiliar. Both during and after her lover's death, except for a period of time when she "rambled," grieving, she worked hard on a sheep ranch:

> . . . I suspect that my original motive for coming here was to "lose myself" in new and unpopulated territory. Instead of producing the numbness I thought I wanted, life on the sheep ranch woke me up. The vitality of the people I was working with flushed out what had become a hallucinatory rawness inside me. I threw away my clothes and bought new ones; I cut my hair. The arid country was a clean slate. Its absolute indifference steadied me. (Erlich, 1985, pp. 3-4)

Leaving behind the artifacts of a society caught up in its own constructs,

> . . . For the first time, I was able to take up residence on earth with no alibis, no self-promoting schemes. (Erlich, 1985, p. ix)

Erlich experienced an upheaval of her accustomed ways of viewing others, and so did I. After the heart-and-soul-chilling volcano of meaning afforded by the sea and sky and year-'round snow-capped, craggy mountains of the Alaskan tundra, I found that I had not the slightest idea of how to find some kinship, even a generalized kinship in the human family, with these people who, like their state, looked eerily familiar yet proved to be completely alien, to me, in their own understanding of Being. Even in their aesthetics I was perplexed, and soon after our arrival in the disreputable-looking village that was to be "home," I wrote:

> We got to our apartment and, like the rest of the shabby-looking little town, it had a pretty down-at-the-heels look to it, until we got inside the door, and discovered the apartment itself was one you might find in any fairly cosmopolitan city. Of course the furnishings carried a thick layer of the strange volcanic dust that sifts over everything, which sticks in the throat and causes a constant feeling of suffocation, although one gets used to it.... and the wind howls continually, while broken-down, rusting cars scream around the corner the apartment building is on. An ancient station

> wagon with the sign "Linda's Taxi-Cab Co." on it cruises constantly, although there is really nowhere to go.
>
> Inside, you'd never know you were in Alaska ... until you peer through the dusty window and see those repeatedly astonishing snow-covered mountains rising all around (for King Cove is a true cove) and sunlight sparkling on amazingly blue water. The fishing boats add to the scene—no pleasure-crafts or sailboats in these utilitarian waters--and dogs run loose everywhere. Ravens, the "pigeons" of Alaska, scavenge and converse constantly. Bald eagles soar with the gulls. A group of third-graders, looking like kids anywhere except for their dark faces and bright, almond eyes, appeared at our door collecting for the Heart Fund, and were fascinated to find that the "new people" had arrived. They came in for a visit, and they and Emmie [our daughter] stared at each other and shuffled a bit, and then we ran them out, inviting them back when we were a little more settled. (Author, unpublished communication, 1996)

Those first days were almost surreal in the surprises contained in the apparent. This feeling reminded me of Erlich's surprise when, invited by John, the sheep foreman, to use the spare bedroom in his trailerhouse, she found that

> . . . The interior was extraordinary: crushed red velvet loveseats, gold lamps hung from what looked like anchor chain, a pink kitchen with blue rugs, an empty bookshelf, a statue of Adonis on an end table. (Erlich, 1985, p. 35)

Shortly after we moved in, our new landlady stopped by to greet us. She was a pleasant, middle-aged woman who looked like any suburban matron (although I later found that she had been raised on an even more isolated island and hadn't discovered Nordstrom's until she was an adult), and when she took me down to her

end of the building, through the dark, dusty halls with their tattered indoor-outdoor carpeting, plastic ferns and peeling brown walls, I was shattered to find myself stepping into a lavish but tastefully decorated house such as one might find in an affluent suburb in the "lower forty-eight." Oriental rugs and brocaded antique furniture, a "French Country" kitchen equipped with up-to-the-minute appliances and even a kitchen "island," gourmet cookware hanging overhead, plus the feature that really shook me, given the condition of the windows in the rest of the building: small-paned, elegant lead-glass windows, including one bow window, looking out on a tiny but landscaped garden. In short, her end of the building was a "house" built for her by her deceased husband, no doubt to console her for his long absences during fishing season.

Somehow, for me, this experience illustrated one of the first lessons of Being that I was given on coming to "bush" Alaska: nothing is as it first appears. Shabby, disheveled shacks give way to warm, stylish homes, and craggy, tattily-dressed fishermen prove to be readers of impressive books, although few of them have more than a high-school education. I had to relinquish my ideas about the signs of affluence, of social class and education, and learn that in this land, I should not make any quick assessments based on appearances. Nor were my own constructs, grown fixed through the years, of any use at all to a people who had survived without me for quite awhile. Knowing of the middle-class, liberal sensibility that wants to "save" the "unfortunate", I was determined to avoid such attitudes, but rather to live alongside and be informed by the people and the land. And the physical evidence of a mode of Being that was unknown to me stood for the actuality of the Selves and the personas of these people, for there was a dissonance between inside and outside--psychically and physically--that spoke of the war-time dispossession from their homes and their ways by those who had

looked like "saviours" and turned out to be pillagers of both spirit and matter. From the first Russian missionary who forced a rigid and alien religious dogma on them, to the American educators who punished native children for speaking anything but English, they had been stripped of their identity, so that by now there was only enough self-respect left to cause a dogged determination to find a way to fit--integrity intact--into a society that made no sense, but promised much. I felt that often, they themselves did not know why they did what they did, and it seemed to me that all these things, the alienation from native culture, the isolation, the unrelenting climate which worked against any attempts to put on the veneer of civilization, and the lack of adequate medical or educational resources brought about attitudes and behaviors that were to me often puzzling, sometimes frustrating and, all too often, harmful to their own interests. For instance, in that isolated place where the mountains and the climate closed in on most attempts at free contact with the outside world, the children were often bored; the television sets and "bootlegged" cablevision they had now told them of a life not available to them, and they no longer had before them their parents' demonstration of the subsistence mode of life still practiced in many Alaskan villages. In their boredom and confusion, drinking and drugs seemed to offer a psychic journey away from the everyday, even if not a physical one. Most of the parents had already succumbed to these temptations, which looked like the only kinds consistently available, and which had become very nearly a social standard in their lives. Thus, when their children began getting into trouble, rather than to attempt discipline, parents would "cover" for their children, and defend their behavior. I was at a loss to determine whether this came from the "denial syndrome" of the parents regarding their own behavior, or of that primitive tribal tradition which admonished parents to be lenient with their children.

Similarly, it became quickly apparent that, while opinions and resentments ran hot in this closed-in community, direct confrontation was practically unheard of. To get across a message of admonishment or indignation, it was customary to tell everyone *except* the one this feeling was directed at, so that the message would eventually get to that person. Writing letters to the mayor, filing grievances and calling supervisors to complain were all popular methods of dealing with issues that could have been taken care of simply by questioning the suspect as to the perception that was being given. It was easy to call this behavior dysfunctional, but traditionally confrontation within the tribe was frowned upon, for the survival of the people depended on at least surface unity, and I eventually learned that the person whose gossip about a neighbor might become painful public knowledge on one day, might just as easily save the other's life on another, and do it willingly. Families feuded, and brother fought against brother, but when there was a wedding or a funeral, the village promptly pulled back into itself to become the collective entity that grieved and celebrated as one.

Erlich speaks of a similar kind of familial feeling of the people of Wyoming:

> Despite the desolate look, there's a coziness to living in this state. There are so few people (only 470,000) that ranchers who buy and sell cattle know one another statewide; the kids who choose to go to college usually go to the state's one university, in Laramie; hired hands work their way around Wyoming in a lifetime of hirings and firings. And despite the physical separation, people stay in touch, often driving two or three hours to another ranch for dinner.
>
> . . . One old-time couple I know, whose turn-of-the-century homestead was used by an outlaw gang as a relay station for stolen horses,

> recalls that if you were traveling, desperado or not, any lighted ranch house was a welcome sign.
>
> . . . good-naturedness is concomitant with severity. Friendliness is a tradition. A common sight is two pickups stopped side by side far out on a range, on a dirt track winding through the sage. The drivers will share a cigarette, uncap their thermos bottles, and pass a battered cup, steaming with coffee, between windows. (Erlich, 1985, p. 5)

Thus, a small village and a sparsely-populated state have much in common. When I drive to work each day on dirt roads that go nowhere, I am obligated to wave at all who pass as they do me, and I have learned that there is a code to these casual waves, that they express every sentiment from friendliness to hostility.

Because of all these dissonances of behavior, of emotion, of Being, I have learned to take nothing for granted, but to expect a silent reason that speaks of a ethic of behavior rooted in values that are no longer consciously known, but only felt. Meanings are explained in silence, in gestures, and kindness is utility.

> . . . The silence is profound. Instead of talking, we seem to share one eye. Keenly observed, the world is transformed. The landscape is engorged with detail, every movement on it chillingly sharp. The air between people is charged. Days unfold, bathed in their own music. Nights become hallucinatory; dreams, prescient. (Erlich, 1985, p. 7)

It would seem that people's behavior is a reflection of the hardness of the land and the climate: unrelenting yet changeable, silent, yet loud with the calls of ravens, who speak in a myriad of sounds that range for screams of rage to coos and clickings of delight; stoic but sometimes loudly joyful, excessive yet sparing. All these attributes and more seem to arise out of primordial values and the struggle to

not only survive, but to move forward and claim their inalienable rights. In that other, seemingly opposite kind of space in Wyoming,

> . . . the dark side to the grandeur of these spaces is the small-mindedness that seals people in. Men become hermits; women go mad. Cabin fever explodes into suicides, or into grudges and lifelong family feuds. Two sisters in my area inherited a ranch but found they couldn't get along. They fenced the place in half. When one's cows got out and mixed with the other's, the women went at each other with shovels. They ended up in the same hospital room but never spoke a word to each other for the rest of their lives. (Erlich, 1985, p. 13)

All this--both space and insularity--compared with the way we "civilized" people hide from emotions that can't be hidden from in these sparer societies:

> From the clayey soil of northern Wyoming is mined bentonite, which is used as a filler in candy, gum, and lipstick. We Americans are great on fillers, as if what we have, what we are, is not enough. We have a cultural tendency toward denial, but, being affluent, we strangle ourselves with what we can buy. We have only to look at the houses we build to see how we build *against* space, the way we drink against pain and loneliness. We fill up space as if it were a pie shell, with things whose opacity further obstructs our ability to see what is already there. (Erlich, 1985, p. 15)

It is difficult, at ground level, to see a great deal of difference in the styles of coping of the privileged and underprivileged, for when the trappings are taken away, the same impulses guide us all: love and savagery, hatred and kindness and, perhaps most of all, the quest for *Being*. So there was a lesson to be learned in the relinquishing of concepts in order to uncover truth, and an even greater lesson to

be learned in finding ways to be neighborly with those who often seemed decidedly un-neighborly on the surface.

Vast spaces and unfamiliar traditions of Being, embraced, brought healing and finally realization to both Erlich and, eventually, to me. For her, the spareness of both land and emotion were soothing to the pain of loss when her lover died back in New York:

> I stayed in Wyoming and went to Keith's funeral instead of David's. Keith's wife, supported on either side by her children, slumped into the shape of an "S" and could not stop the flow of tears. I was dry-eyed for a while. David's presence--his "ghost"--appeared everywhere, mischievous and glinting. It felt scandalous to be alive, obscene to experience pleasure or pain. Then a wheel of emptiness turned inside me and churned there for a long time.
>
> The tears came and lasted for two years. I traveled. One childhood friend was indulgent enough to let me stay in his Santa Fe house and lie on top of his bed while he slept under the covers. To be alone in a room at night was anathema. Windows flew open and voices yelled, "Wake up!" I'd call John at the ranch. "You still driftin'?" he'd ask. After many months he said, "One place is as good as another, you might as well come home."
>
> When I pulled up to the trailerhouse--after a nonstop, seventeen-hour stint of driving--John was packing groceries to go to sheep camp. "You might as well come along," he said, trying to sound nonchalant. "I don't know why, but these guys have been worrying about you."
>
> In the next few weeks a handful of women befriended me. One of the myths about the West is its portrayal as "a boy's world," but the women I met--descendants of outlaws, homesteaders, ranchers, and Mormon

> pioneers--were as tough and capable as the men were softhearted. BobbyJo, juggling five young children and a temperamental husband, called. "Come on over and cry in my kitchen," she said until I laughed. Dorothy, a cowgirl in her forties whose parents' homestead was an overnight depot for stolen horses coming down the outlaw trail, showed up at John's one night: "Let's go honky-tonkin'," she yelled through the window, but because she didn't drink and there was no place to dance, we'd go for a ride instead. . . . We ran our horses across the foothills of the Wild Horse Range. A stud bunch (a stallion and mares) lunged up out of a dry wash as we passed by. We came across the carcass of a horse. Its stiff hide was draped over the bones. I wanted to cut it away and wear it around my shoulders. This was how I could wear death and still be alive. (Erlich, 1985, p. 40)

As she began to heal, her emotions went up and down. After a binge, she wrote to a friend, "True solace is finding none, which is to say, it is everywhere." (Erlich, 1985, p. 41) Deciding to use solitude as an antidote to solitude, she moved to an even more remote location:

> I once asked Ellen how she withstood the frustrations of ranching alone. . . . "I don't do a very good job of it," she said modestly. "I get in these hoarding moods and get mad at myself for all the stupid things I do. Then I pick up this old kaleidoscope and give it a whirl. See, it's impossible to keep just one thing in view. It gives way to other things and they're all beautiful." (Erlich, 1985, p. 43)

Solitude, sameness, were the next lessons I had to learn in order to survive here in King Cove. One day passed into another, and there was nowhere to go except to the office and back home, with an occasional stop at the store, whose inventory only changed when the planes could fly across from Cold Bay. In a locale where

nothing seemed to be happening, I began to learn that *everything* was happening, and that survival meant noticing it all. To find nuances behind ordinary conversations. To discern, in the ravens' continual jabbering, an explanation of the meaning of life and death. To light many candles when the days grew short and the wind howled, and to find, in that flickering light, a warmth of enlightened intent. Cold mornings driving down the hill to work, still pitch dark at 9:30 a.m., the lights of the village became landscapes of light beyond the seeming. Sameness meant reaching inside for resources that had become unnecessary through nonuse, and the exercising of those resources was like stretching an atrophied muscle, at once painful and energizing. When people grew mean, both to each other, to themselves and, sometimes, me or my family, it was necessary to find both the cause and the cure for their meanness in the world they stubbornly clung to, despite the lures of an easier, brighter city life. The tundra was my teacher, the seasons dividing the lessons into gradual definitions of what was unfolding before me, when I cared to look. Always there was a need to find abundance in scarcity, as if looking for skin and hair where there were only bones. Erlich found a similar sparseness in the Wyoming winters:

> Winter scarified me. Under each cheekbone I thought I could feel claw marks and scar tissue. What can seem like a hard-shell veneer on the people here is really a necessary spirited resilience. . . .
>
> Living well here has always been the art of making do in emotional, as well as material ways. . . . The toughness I was learning was not a martyred doggedness, a dumb heroism, but the art of accommodation. I thought: to be tough is to be fragile; to be tender is to be truly fierce. (Erlich, 1985, p. 44)

I have learned to do more than survive in this lonely place where nothing is happening yet everything is happening. I have learned to create richness from deprivation, and to appreciate scarcity's way of revealing the hidden. Daily I am given the opportunity to Be in ways that illuminate the primordial meaning in the land and the people I live with. This is a new psychology of Being.

When the wind moans and the rain slants down unrelentingly, seeming wetter than any rain I had ever known in the lower forty-eight, I am given the opportunity to slide into the apparent darkness or to bring forth an uncreated light from that same darkness. Time, space, spareness and fullness speak a catechism that teaches the deepest lessons. Erlich speaks of the hard, frigid winters in Wyoming, and of the way vastness becomes a cloister:

> The name Wyoming comes from an Indian word meaning "at the great plains," but the plains are really valleys, great arid valleys, sixteen hundred square miles, with the horizon bending up on all sides into mountain ridges. This gives the vastness a sheltering look.
>
> Winter lasts six months here. Prevailing winds spill snow-drifts to the east, and new storms from the northwest replenish them. This white bulk is sometimes dizzying, even nauseating, to look at. At twenty, thirty, and forty degrees below zero, not only does your car not work, but neither do your mind and body. The landscape hardens into a dungeon of space. During the winter, while I was riding to find a new calf, my jeans froze to the saddle, and in the silence that such cold creates I felt like the first person on earth, or the last.
>
> . . . To live and work in this kind of open country, with its hundred-mile views, is to lose the distinction between background and foreground. When I asked an older ranch hand to describe Wyoming's openness, he said,

> "It's all a bunch of nothing--wind and rattlesnakes--and so much of it you can't tell where you're going or where you've been and it don't make much difference." (Erlich, 1985, p. 2)

It is this last thought--of whether coming or going makes a difference--that ultimately tests the sanity. There are moments when the effort of continually facing the need to excavate meaning from the sparseness becomes tiring, becomes too great an effort, and in those moments, it is only a herculean effort that brings one back to the larger perspective of the reality that is being lived, the gift of the necessity of comparing the small with the vast:

> . . . The sky, lately, seems to be much more crowded than it used to be. Satellites make their silent passes in the dark with great regularity. We counted eighteen in one hour's viewing. How odd to think that while they circumnavigated the planet, Martin and I had moved only six miles into our local wilderness and had seen no other human for the two weeks we stayed there. (Erlich, 1985, p. 7)

No doubt people come to this village for many reasons, and perhaps only a few realize this gift, the gift of a purer perspective, one stripped of the noisome, messy details we mostly fill our lives with. Being takes effort, and seeing takes vision. Life and death depend upon each other, and daily offer the opportunity to live in the knowledge of their oneness. During my first few weeks here, I wrote,

> A few weeks ago, a local teenager committed suicide, and the community is still grieving. Recently, the mother of a small girl found that her cancer had metastasized, and everyone knows about it. The whole community is involved in some way. This morning I was at home, trying to write, but was called into the clinic to talk to a young Mexican woman who was having a miscarriage. She and her Fillippino husband had come here to

> work at the cannery. Such a sweet couple, so much love; she didn't speak much English, and he took very good care of her. She was unwilling to take the Tylenol we offered, because she didn't want to hurt the baby, who had certainly, by now, miscarried. I sat with them, the three of us held hands and prayed for the baby. Nothing else occurred to us. She wept and wept, I don't know how much from her physical pain and how much for the baby, but she still wouldn't take anything for the pain. (Author, 1996, unpublished communication)

Even as we weep, we take time to celebrate, the locals by binge drinking, and ourselves by looking, gazing deeply at all that seems to offer something of Being. A dozen times I go out on my deck to look at the ocean, and on each occasion it has a different message to offer. One learns to put things into perspective here:

> Today the funeral of the woman who died last weekend was held. I've got to paint a careful picture for you, so you can "see" what this means in this tiny little village at the end of the world. First of all, I don't remember if I told you that, when one arrives here by plane--the only way to arrive, if not by boat--the drive down from the "airport," which consists of a landing strip and a phone booth, basically, is kind of like coming down out of the clouds: one descends, down rocky dirt roads, from those naked, white mountains, past the "lagoon," (as good a name as any), where the gulls swoop and sea otters play, and the first sign of life is the "post office," a rusted trailer and the most visited institution in town. Right next to that is the village cemetery, in the shadow of the Russian Orthodox Church, one of the two churches here. It is, in fact, of classic Russian Orthodox architecture, dome and all, although it is constructed of wood that the paint wore off of long ago. Inside, it is a

sweetly exquisite example of Byzantine artistry. The cemetery is unlike any cemetery most of us have seen: there is not one carved headstone. All the little graves are surrounded by small, peeling picket fences, and each has a wooden cross, usually askew. There is nowhere else to be buried that I am aware of, and lately there has been talk of the village controversy over the visiting priest's refusal to allow a boy who had committed suicide to be buried there.

When a funeral happens, it is truly a happening, because it is impromptu: the family must wait for the deceased to be brought back from Anchorage by plane or barge, often, and the weather must cooperate for either. It is easy to miss a funeral, because when the body comes home and all conditions are right, the funeral takes place without notice. We are "outsiders" here, and wanted to attend as a gesture of respect and community solidarity, but we had to count on others to tell us when the funeral was going to "happen." There had already been two "prayer services," and I am told that these are an opportunity for the bereaved to express their anguish, which they do with volume and abandon, contrary to their usual solemnity.

Today, we knew the funeral was likely to take place, but those of us in the clinic, as outsiders, were not sure just what the schedule would be. The first sign of the imminent occasion was that all clinic staff disappeared without a word at noon, locking the doors behind them. The Family Nurse Practitioner came back from lunch and was puzzled to find his office closed and his staff vanished. We newcomers got together and discussed what we should do. We knew the funeral would "start" at the home and progress to the church and then the graveyard. We were reluctant to go to the home, as we had not been invited, so we decided to just wait at the church, and after

several false starts (radio misreports of when the funeral was actually happening), David and Emmie and the visiting doctor and FNP started for the church. By then, it was so late that I had a client coming, so I stayed at the office. The little girl whose mother had died was one of Emmie's classmates, and it seemed important for her classmates to go.

The church, David says, was like all other buildings here: shabby outside, and beautiful inside. A typical Russian Orthodox church, ornate, Byzantine in appearance. The church was crowded, and the husband and father, an active alcoholic, seemed pretty checked out, David said. We were particularly worried about the child, Emmie's classmate, because she had pretty much abdicated any kind of acceptance of her mother's death. Emmie had told us that she didn't seem sad at all, at school. David had been working with her, and said the same. I gather, though, that she did cry at her mother's funeral, and was surrounded by other children and relatives, illustrating the real impact of an extended family during life's passages.

There were flowers, just like at any other funeral. To have been brought here by plane, they must have cost a small fortune. And now this mother of this child is in that little, stark graveyard, and I can't see any reason to place any importance in anything in the world, because it is in these moments that the truth strikes most deeply at the heart: in birthing and dying and leaving and staying, and the fragrance that persists after the flower has died. (Author, 1996, unpublished communication)

Recently, I have begun traveling monthly to another of our villages, one even smaller than this one, Nelson Lagoon. There are about 150 people there, and it is an even more cloistered atmosphere than this one. Perhaps because the need

for unity is even greater where there are fewer emotional and material resources (the Lagoon has only a liquor store), I have found that my services are welcomed, for the most part, and that the people I have reached out to have reached back eagerly. My frequent flights in those little "bush" planes have been enlightening, as well. I have flown in glorious, brilliant weather, when the vision of the mountains and the sea have been a meditation of ecstasy, when I have been able to look down and see a pod of whales or a lone caribou. I have flown on rainy, gusty days when the locals, who are evidently more frightened of flying than I am, have wept in terror at each bounce or jolt. I have flown as the only passenger, with the back of the plane loaded with either rank-smelling "fresh" produce--or a casket. On that last occasion, the pilot confessed to me that while he didn't mind flying with the casket, he felt miserable thinking of the feelings of those waiting family members looking up into the sky and seeing his plane landing, the bringer of death. I have walked in the black sand of the Bering Sea and seen huge jellyfish washed up on the shore, apparently not quite dead yet not quite alive. All these things offer up the opportunity to see the reason in pain and the logic in scarcity. I am given the chance to read the message of Being unvarnished by Things:

> . . . Finally, the lessons of impermanence taught me this: loss constitutes an odd kind of fullness; despair empties out into an unquenchable appetite for life. (Erlich, 1985, p. x)

And in the association with Things, one finds accommodation for the vision that this world offers:

> Walking back to the ranch house from the shed, we saw the Northern Lights. They looked like talcum powder fallen from a woman's face. Rouge and blue eyeshadow streaked the spires of white light which

> exploded, then pulsated, shaking the colors down--like lives--until they faded from sight. (Erlich, 1985, p. 47)

Through her own communion with space, Erlich eventually became able to manage her pain and even, occasionally, mix it with other emotions. The first time she was able to love someone again, "sexual passion became the thread between having been born and dying," and

> The next morning, at the spot where I had seen the grasshopper and chipmunk, I found the note my friend had scrawled in red dust: "Hello!" it read, as if greeting me after a long trip away from home. (Erlich, 1985, p. 48)

I find a kind of sisterhood with Gretel Erlich, because even though my escape was seemingly unmotivated by tragedy as was hers, perhaps I, too, needed to suffer a kind of death or renunciation of one truth for a more desirable one. That death took numerous forms: the death of my understanding of people, the death of my suffocation with things and movement, the death *and* birth of seeing and Being in ways that were unclouded by the false or the small and, finally, the moment-to-moment death of the struggle for meaning in the unseeming.

> Morning. Blue air comes ringed with coyotes. The ewes wake clearing their communal throats like old men. Lambs shake their flop-eared heads at leaves of grass, negotiating the blade. People have asked in the past, "What do you do out there? Don't you get bored?" The problem seems to be something else. There's too much of everything here. I can't pace myself to it. (Erlich, 1985, p. 56)

Morning. Emerging in the dark night of understanding, I find a newness that is ancient, another ecstasy in opposites, happiness in loss, in deprivation, in sacrifice. Awakened, I have the opportunity to stay awake.

The sun sets, the moon wanes, the spring passes, the year ends. I asked of Life, "Tell me, how long will you continue to be?" "I?" said life, "I shall live forever." (Inayat Khan, 1978, 791)

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