

## CHRONICLE 18

### Whiteouts and Inukshuks

I don't know about you but every morning when I turn on my computer I get more and more articles about climate change. A few years ago they were infrequent. Today they are constant.

They are all telling us what to do and what not to do. They are like a blizzard of ideas, suggestions and warnings. No not just a blizzard. They are a whiteout that leaves us blind, helpless with no sense of direction about the path ahead.

I know something about whiteouts. I once got trapped in one in Rankin Inlet, an Inuit community on the west coast of Baffin Island about 1,500 kilometers north of Winnipeg.

I was working in the community and was forced to hole up for several days in a room on the second floor of a hotel. The whiteout descended with a vengeance. My window was covered with snow. I couldn't see the outside world and I began to suffer from cabin fever.

Several days later, as the storm seemed to be weakening, I decided to try to take a walk. Big mistake! I struggled down the street bent over to maintain my balance and ended up in a cul-de-sac. As I remember it, the houses in the cul-de-sac were not very close together. Then the storm picked up again and the gale-force wind knocked me to the ground. When I lifted my head, I could not see a single house.

I was wearing a parka with a fur-rimmed hood that extended four to six inches out in front of my face. My breath was fogging my glasses. I was blind. The wind had turned me around. I began to crawl, terrified that I would lose my way, get beyond the houses and end up frozen. Fortunately I bumped into the wall of a house and hunkered down against it in a fetal position. I was there for I don't know how long and when the wind lessened a bit I managed to find my way back to the hotel.

Inuit have had to deal with whiteouts for centuries. One of the things they invented to get around in their harsh environment was the inukshuk. As most Canadians know, these are piles of stones arranged to look like a human. (The word "inukshuk" in their language means "like a person".) They were often built on hills to indicate the route ahead. They were usually visible in blizzard conditions.

Inukshuks also had a spiritual significance. Inuit would build them near dangerous river or sea crossings and offer small tokens or gifts to ask the land to protect them in these places.

Inukshuks are a classic example of the elders' mantra that I often heard when, as the superintendent of social services for the Baffin Region, I visited communities to get feedback on our services. The elders would often say in Inuktitut, "*Learn from the land*".

But the elders were referring to more than an intellectual type of learning. They were talking about a relationship, the need for their listeners to become part of the land. It was a matter of survival. If they learned to become part of the land, the land would become part of them and would sustain them.

Every morning when I finish with the news I sit in my chair and begin to work on a chronicle. On the wall across from me is a very large 2 by 3 foot poster with pictures of inukshuks in twenty-five different Arctic locations. I often reflect on these structures as symbols of what we today would call an Earth spirituality.

Inukshuks are created from the gifts of the land. They teach us that, as we move into the climate changing future, the land will care for us if we allow it to do so. The key to our survival is to become part of the land. In our arrogance we've taken over the lead role in the evolution process. We now must return it to its rightful owner and become partners with the land to develop our future together.

The inukshuk builders don't create these structures/symbols for themselves alone. They are thinking about their community members who will travel this same route after them. If we are to survive in our whiteout journey we must think of our community, We can only survive together. We must trust ourselves and the community of all those who want to make a difference.

The inukshuk also reminds us that we must prepare in advance for the journey mentally and spirituality. We must expect many whiteouts ahead.

Finally, when I look at that poster a smile often comes to my face as I remember a conversation I had many years ago. I decided to leave government service and strike out on my own as an organizational consultant. I was working on a name for my future company. I finally decided on "Inukshuk Management Consultants."

One day I went into the office of a long-time civil servant, told him about the proposed name for my company and asked him what he thought of it. He paused, looked up at the ceiling as if in deep thought, looked back at me and said very slowly, "It reminds me...of a person...standing out in a field...with his arms up in the air...at 50 below...freezing his balls off."

I laughed and said, "Gee, it's supposed to mean 'Helping to Show the Way'."

**Mike Bell, [www.comoxvalleyclimatechangenetwork.ca](http://www.comoxvalleyclimatechangenetwork.ca)**

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