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**One Wheel — Many Spokes:
USA by Unicycle**

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Chapter 5

Corners

Experience teaches us only one thing at a time—
and hardly that, in my case.

Mark Twain

Before folks start arriving at Neah Bay, Dad and I have some time to explore the Makah Nation. The finest tribal museum in the country is right here, the beneficiary of a mudslide five hundred years ago that simultaneously destroyed and preserved the seaside village of Ozette. Severe storms exposed the village in 1970 and threatened to wash it to sea. An archeological recovery was quickly organized. Over sixty thousand items from the effort are now under the care of the museum. Whaling, sealing and fishing artifacts, basketry and other tools, canoes, and even a replica longhouse are all on display at the museum, testimony to the strength of the traditional lifestyle here.

The Makah are a whaling people, and in this they share common heritage with the Inupiat people of the Seward Peninsula. Muktuk is still a treat served for special occasions. It consists of the skin and attached blubber of the whale, cut into fine pieces and eaten after dipping in seal oil. The remembrance of it takes my spirit right back to Nome. Whale hunting is infrequent on the Seward Peninsula, usually just a single whale every year or two. When one does give itself to a village, people come from far and wide to help with the preparation and distribution of the whale.

Perhaps the closest non-native people get to food being a spiritual experience is Thanksgiving turkey. Magnify that a hundred times and one can begin to imagine the importance of subsistence food gathering. Food, more than just calories and taste, is about the spirit. In the traditional way of understanding things, animals offer themselves to the hunter. I remember how many times Anne and I walked along the beach in Nome, seeing hunters dressed and ready to set out in their loaded boats.

“Going hunting?” I asked

“Maybe...” they answered, for the goal is not conquest of prey but submitting to the harmony of land and sea and its provision. What a different outlook this is from the one I received growing up in a Los Angeles suburb where everything we needed came from grocery and department stores.

The right to hunt whale is written directly into the Makah’s treaty with the United States government, but for over seventy years, while the gray whale was on the endangered species list, the Makah did no hunting. In 1993 the International Whaling Commission determined that gray whale numbers actually were greater than the population existing before commercial whaling almost killed off the species. So far, one whale has been killed since the Makah resumed hunting. In 1999, a migrating gray whale “offered itself” to the people.

“The harvest of the whale and the celebration of the Makah people revived a critical cultural tradition,” stated Billy Frank Jr., the Chairman of the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission. “It’s important to understand that the tribes kept these rights when they signed the treaties. They never gave them up. They never will.”

The whale hunt sparked a huge protest by well-meaning advocates of whale conservation. It is not easy, no matter how noble the intentions, for one group of people to allow another the freedom to be true to their traditions.

As for the Seward Peninsula Lutheran Endowment that we will celebrate tomorrow as we officially inaugurate this ride, people often ask what place Christianity or the Lutheran Church have in Inupiat Eskimo culture. I ask the same questions myself, and fall back on events from our time in Alaska, a time when the experiences were far deeper than any explanations I had.

One time I was invited along on a seal-hunt with my friend Frank and his grandson John. Ten miles from shore, they wove their small Lund boat from the open water into the spring ice-pack of the Bering Sea. The motor pushed us through the ice-crowded water at what seemed perilous speed while we searched for “oogruk,” the enormous bearded seal so prevalent in the springtime.

“There!” cried Frank suddenly as he cut the motor.

John’s shot reached its target. Frank gunned the boat, and John harpooned the oogruk before it could sink into the icy water.

We tied up at a nearby iceberg, large enough to haul the seal out. Frank stroked his big knife to razor sharpness, then began to cut into the blubber to butcher the seal. All the while he chanted,

“Quyanna, Jesus.”

Quyanna (“Kwee-yah-nah”) is the Inupiat word for thank you. “Jesus” is the word for a “savior” from the deserts of the Middle-East. What does Jesus mean on an iceberg?

The bang of the gun. The roar of the two-stroke outboard. The chant of Jesus combined with twelve thousand years of arctic quyanna.

“We wanted to show our pastor what the hunt is like,” Frank told me.

He handed me a small slice of warm steaming intestine. Frank ate a large piece. I ate my small one.

“Quyanna Jesus.”

“Quyanna Jesus,” I say again today at Neah Bay, still wondering how faith, culture, and history all weave together. By early afternoon, our company begins arriving and the celebration begins.

Uncle Tom and my cousins from Canada are the first to show up.

“Wow,” exclaims my uncle. “What a place you picked to start!”

He’s right. We’re looking out over the bay, which is dotted with rock islands. Rain forest surrounds us, but overhead the sky is cloudless blue. This is everything I had hoped for, only better.

Then I see Anne coming. KariAnna and Kai jump out of the car almost before it stops. Hugs and kisses go all around. Anne and I are fifteen years down the road from when we first fell in love. We both look a little older, but in this moment of grand adventure we feel like kids once again.

Karl and Deb and Kaj are following. We’ve lived the past year in their basement on Whidbey Island. Their Kaj is our godson. Our Kai is their godson. The line between friend and family is a blur with us.

Next, putt-putting up in their 1982 Volkswagen Westphalia are our travel partners for the summer, Robert and Amy with their five-year-old Nathaniel and three-year-old Caroline. Robert’s a six-foot tall ex-high school football team captain. At thirty years old his hair has already given up on him, making it easy to wear his biking helmet. He is an image of the strong, intimidating biker, but his head is filled with stories lived and the knowledge of constant reading. Amy is dwarfed by Robert’s size but has a giant’s measure of competence and confidence. Almost always she offers a smile that is framed by her short black hair. She is the most spiritual person of our group and hopes to find time to read and meditate along with taking care of our band of travelers. Robert and Amy were high school sweethearts when they were growing up in Colstrip, Montana. In truth, though, we know very little about them. We met at a New Year’s party a few months earlier. After talking together for just half an hour Robert shocked us by turning to Amy and telling her, “On Monday I’m going to work and tell my boss I need four months off to bicycle across the country.” Robert and Amy both work as physical therapists at Whidbey General Hospital.

Amy’s response had been equally surprising. She answered with an immediate single word, “Okay.”

It was that quick and simple. Really. Robert’s boss agreed and now here they are. I used to think that Anne and I were impulsive until we met Robert and Amy.

As soon as we say hello, they ask me about my Achilles tendon.

“It hurts,” I admit.

“Take off your shoes. We can get a look right now,” Amy offers.

“You just need to ride some more,” Robert concludes after checking my heel. “See how it’s high on your heel where it’s sore? That’s where your muscles and tendon join. It will get stronger the more you ride. Take Aleve for the inflammation. You’ll be fine.”

Plenty of journeys have been stopped dead in their tracks by a bad ankle, a failed knee, or some other injury. What a relief to hear that I will heal as I ride.

Friends and family keep arriving, including my mom and my brother. The parking lot turns into a big reunion that eventually shifts three miles over to the Tribal Center.

“This is like being at our wedding all over again,” Anne says to me later in the evening. “People are here from so many parts of our lives.”

Drama occurs during the night with the rushed departure of Karl and Deb and Kaj. At 4:30 a.m. they get a phone call that Karl’s mom is failing quickly. Hurriedly, they throw their things into the van and speed away from the Tribal Center, trying to make the four-hour drive to Seattle in time to be with Nora, Karl’s mom. She has been

struggling all year, and last week it became clear that her remaining days are few. Karl and Deb agonized over whether to come all the way out to Neah Bay. Finally Nora said to them, "I'm fine, you just go."

We keep them in our prayers, getting up again a few hours later when the sky turns bright blue, another cloudless day. After breakfast our group of two dozen drives the five-mile gravel road from the Tribal Center to Cape Flattery. We bail out of cars and motor homes then hike the last half-mile to the cape with unicycles and guitars in tow. The cape is recognized as the most northwesterly point of the lower forty-eight states. The trail has hundreds of cedar steps. After the first few we are engulfed by forest. Three platforms give views out over wave-sculptured cliffs and onto a sea that is tranquil blue and green this morning. People remark what a perfect place and a perfect day it is for starting the ride. We share a feeling of holy space without a word needing to be said.

Of course, we gather and say some words anyway. Chris Savage sings "You're a family of God on a Journey," a song he wrote for us back when we left Michigan.

Bishop Ron Martinson has brought a banner made by folks at Alaska Native Lutheran Congregation. A bald eagle has been circling above us as we mark the beginning of this journey. I am reminded of seal hunting with Frank.

"Quyanna Jesus." I silently repeat his ancient words of thanks.

We linger; then we track back up the cedar board trail to start pedaling. Robert has been itching to start this ride from the moment he got the four-month leave. Even the five miles back to the tribal center have his eyes lit up with cross-country anticipation. Anne has her new recumbent bicycle ready. She can recline on this bike, a bit like a lawn chair on wheels. Kai has his bike. KariAnna has her unicycle. My brother Karl borrows one of my unicycles. Those not riding line up for more pictures.

"Look!" someone yells and points.

As we turn another bald eagle swoops close and circles around us. One time. Twice. Then again, close enough to see individual feathers. Weather, words, and now eagle's wings are marking this beginning. We all mount up and ride onto the road.

KariAnna pumps right along on her unicycle. Uphill and down, she makes a full two miles, her longest ride ever. Kai does the same on his bike, even though the hills are steep for him. My mom has been following in the car, ready to load the kids and drive them back to the Tribal Center.

When day's end comes, I'm overwhelmed with gratitude. We have been surrounded by love and care and well wishes; for the moment we are full of confidence to ride into all the unknown challenges awaiting. Time now to turn the corner and begin heading east across America.



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