

The curious caribou



By Nate Smelle

CONSIDERING THIS EDITION of *Bancroft This Week* will be online on Tuesday, April 22 I thought it would be fitting to say a few words about my favourite holiday of the year; Earth Day. Of course Halloween and Christmas are tied for a close second, and Easter and Thanksgiving are not far behind, but for me Earth Day seems to be the one that celebrates the reason all of the other holidays exist in the first place.

Without fresh air to breathe, clean water to drink and good fertile soil to stand on and grow in, we would not have the opportunity to praise the harvest, the God or gods one might worship.

Walking through the halls of Cardiff Elementary School after watching a series of puppet shows performed by the students I noticed an Earth Day themed bulletin board on the wall. Surrounding an earth-shaped centre of blue and green handprints were pledge cards filled out by the students. Some of them read 'I will not leave the lights on,' and 'I will not litter,' also 'I will ride my bike and walk more.' Small steps towards progress, however, as those small changes accumulate they amount to a much larger impact over time.

For most people who consider themselves an environmentalist there is usually a defining moment, or an experience they can point to where they started to actively care for the planet. For me this moment came after a rough 24 hours at sea aboard the ship the MV

Lyubov Orlova following a crossing of the Davis Strait from Greenland to Labrador. To say the waters were rough is a gross understatement. In fact the seas were rolling so heavily the captain ordered everyone to strap themselves into their bunks to avoid falling out of bed.

When the waters had calmed the ship had dropped anchor in Ramah Bay, Labrador. A short ride through frigid iceberg-laden waters and our small team of explorers had landed. Stepping from the zodiac with my still wobbly legs I quickly separated myself from the rest of the group. For as long as I could remember I had dreamt of photographing the wildness of the tundra, so I figured the more distance I could create between myself and the voices of the others, the better chance I had of crossing paths with some of the areas wildlife.

I could no longer see or hear the group. Looking into the distance, the land stretched out before me, empty of any human constructions for as far as I could see. Apparently, the site where we had landed had not been visited by anyone in more than 40 years. Scanning the terrain I noticed a number of clear crystal shards scattered upon the brown earth before me. Picking up a handful of them to observe their beauty more closely, I suddenly felt the eyes of another upon me. Shifting my gaze from what was in my hand to what was observing me, I looked up to see the most impressive wild being that I had ever seen.

There, less than 30 feet away stood before me a massive bull caribou with a set of antlers spreading at least four feet across. Looking deep into the eyes of this creature I knew that I needed to respect the fact that I was a guest in his home. Mutually mesmerized by the uniqueness of the situation, we circled one another until we were within approximately 15 feet of each other. Seeming to simultaneously snap out of the trance-like state the dance had induced in us, both I and the caribou leapt backwards away from one another. With my jaw on the ground I sat on the cold earth, lost in wonder, watching this stunning manifestation of true wildness disappear back into the landscape from which it arose.

This was the first time I felt like I was a part of something far more grandiose than could ever be expressed in words or through art. It is because of this experience that I still feel an affinity with the natural world.

Years later while working as a gravedigger for the city of St.Catharines I was telling this story to a friend I worked with who also happened to be an archaeologist. Intrigued by the idea of crystals from the far north he asked if I could bring them in if I still had them. For years I had kept the crystals wrapped in a cloth napkin from the ship's dining room. So moved by the experience with the caribou I had not looked at them since I took them from my pocket aboard the ship. Without taking a look I brought them into work the next day. Handing them over to him as soon as he opened the folded cloth he smiled and asked 'did you know that this one is an arrowhead?? Shocked by how obviously apparent the rich history of this forgotten crystal truly was, I replied 'no, but I do now.?'

A few days after my encounter with the curious caribou Dr. David Suzuki came aboard the MV Lyubov Orlova in Cape Breton. Speaking with a small group of us in the lounge of the ship a couple of nights later he told us about how great a mentor his father was to him. When his father passed away Suzuki said he had to go in and clean out his house. The evidence he found of his father's resourcefulness taught him a lesson about how people's values have changed over the last few generations.

'When I went in the basement there must have been 150 of these plastic buckets that he had all kinds of things in,' he said.

'He must have had 15 tires. He had four outboard motors. My father grew up in a time where the idea of using something and throwing it away was a sin. We have to rediscover those kinds of values and use things over.'

Ironically, the MV Lyubov Orlova, the ship that delivered me with this inspirational experience is now lost at sea, rusting upon the waves of the north Atlantic. Wastefully set adrift by the Canadian government in 2012 this once proud vessel floats aimlessly with nothing onboard but its crew of cannibal rats. Needlessly wasting anything is a shame, but allowing a ship with an estimated scrap value of \$1,110,000 to simply disappear is a crime.

I wonder what the children at Cardiff Elementary would think of such a conservative use of resources. Pretty major littering offence when you think about it.

