

to life by my people. I know that that essentially overrides everything else.

My people are not dinosaurs ignoring life's problems. We understand change. We know not only change through a natural process but through imposition many times. We know that there are problems faced by many of our people. We understand disparity. We have understood that for hundreds of years, even thousands. We do not compartmentalize life just as it relates to people. Life is viewed in terms of who you are, what you believe and even how you relate to such issues as the land.

During the Berger inquiry of the early 1970s, Mr. Richard Nerysoo, now the Speaker of the Government of the Northwest Territories, said:

It is very clear to me that it is an important and special thing to be an Indian.

He meant to be a Dene.

Being an Indian means being able to understand and live with this world in a very special way. It means living with the land, with the animals, with the birds and the fish, as though they were your sisters and brothers. It means saying the land is an old friend, an old friend your father knew, your grandfather knew, indeed your people have always known—we see our land as much, much more than the white man sees it. To the Indian people our land really is our life. If our land is destroyed, we too are destroyed. If your people take our land you will be taking our life.

This is one statement of how much value life has even as it is expressed in the way life encompasses the land and what it means to our people and how valuable it is.

Where does the love of life, the joy of life, the sanctity of life, the reverence for life come from? How is it nurtured? There are enough theories, I suppose, but I venture to say as a student of my Dene elders that life is the most valuable gift we the Dene feel we are given.

I as a woman and we as women in my culture are viewed as the nurturers, the protectors, the bearers of a special gift called life and men, our companions, are bestowed the privilege of sharing in this experience. This may sound idyllic. However, it is our world view, it is our code of life.

This is not a newly found Christian ethic we have adopted. It is a world view that we have held to because our struggle for survival has been so severe and so harsh

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in many circumstances. We have faced rejection, alienation, colonialization, oppression and possible extermination beyond our control but we survived. Our people have been our greatest resource, our determination to hang on to life our greatest strength.

Listen to some of the views of my elders. They are far more eloquent on their views than I am. A lady by the name of Margaret Sabourin from Fort Providence says:

When I married, my husband and I travelled far together by dogteam. We had two children and it was my greatest sadness when they died and no more children were born to us.

These people were constantly faced with tragic circumstances. Baptiste Gardan, another elder from the same community, said:

My mother died when I was a baby and still nursing. How I used to cry for my mother's milk but my father couldn't do a thing about that. You couldn't buy milk then so I was given flour boiled in moose milk and marrow to suck on. I was so hungry I would cry all the time.

So much hardship to continue living. Elise Bonnetrouge, another woman, said:

I never knew my father. He died when I was very young, leaving my mother to bring up my younger brother and me by herself. Then my brother died and my mother couldn't work any longer. There was only me to take care of her. As I held her, to change her bed of moss, she died in my arms. Now I was quite alone, without food and unable to fend for myself.

Maybe, just maybe because death was always such a close companion of my people, life was such a welcome friend.

The struggle of women in 1989 is not a new one. You have to listen to the words of women from my culture who are older women, the elderly women. Elise Gargan of Fort Providence said:

Life was especially hard for the women. When the man is away the woman has to feed the children. No matter how cold it was I had to check the snares. Before I left the children, I had to tie a leather thong around the waist of one and tie the end to something stable, put another in the swing cradle, and leave the eldest to watch them all. That's how we used to live. The low points in my life were hunger and sickness. We didn't know how to help each other when there was sickness and there was no doctor. Sometimes we boiled herbs, sometimes just thinking of getting better helps you overcome. When you're out in the bush you sometimes experience real physical pain. It was especially difficult giving birth. Sometimes you don't know what you have to do. You are very thankful if your child is alive.