



# Teaching Social Studies through Storytelling: The Enduring Spirit of the Arctic

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**The region in the Canadian Arctic** now known as Nunavut (“our land” in the language of the Inuit) is a vast territory with a small population. Lying north and west of Hudson Bay, and previously part of Canada’s Northwest Territories, it consists of 750,000 square miles of land and 62,000 square miles of water. It has been continuously populated for approximately 4,000 years. According to the 2006 census, it had 29,474 inhabitants, of whom 24,640 identified themselves as Inuit (83.6 %). About three in five were under twenty-five years of age.

Nunavut was created as a homeland for the Inuit people after a majority of residents ratified the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Act in 1992. This was an accord drafted over 20 years by a committed group of Canadians (both Inuit and non-Inuit) that resulted, in 1993, in the largest land claims settlement in Canada, with \$1.1 billion to be paid out between 1993 and 2007. The official creation of Nunavut took place in a magnificent ceremony on April 1, 1999, in Iqaluit.

Iqaluit became the official capital of Nunavut in 1999. Its name means “place of many fish” in Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit. It is the largest community in the region, located on the south coast of Baffin Island at the head of Frobisher Bay. In 2006, the Census reported the population of Iqaluit to be 6,184 (58% Inuit and 41% non-aboriginal), a growth of 18% from 2001.

As the capital of Nunavut, the economy of Iqaluit is based mainly on government. There are many new government buildings and government employees servicing the needs of the new territory, including social services, education,

health, arts, and culture. Because of its modern airport, oil and mining companies use Iqaluit as a service and supply center. Many Inuit in Iqaluit continue to harvest fish and seals for food and clothing while other local residents produce and sell Inuit arts and crafts.

The original religion of many Inuit was shamanism. Although shamanism is still practiced in secret, most Inuit have converted to Christianity over time. This began with the arrival of Christian missionaries in the 1800s and continues to this day. Today in Iqaluit, nearly 85% of the population reports being a member of a Christian faith.

As its name suggests, Iqaluit is a prime fishing area that has provided Inuit with a reliable source of food for many years. In Iqaluit, local residents often head to Sylvia Grinnell River to catch Arctic char, to Ogac Lake to catch cod, or to the ocean to catch shrimp. Some locals actually move to outpost camps during fishing and hunting seasons, returning to the city only for work. Other Iqaluit residents purchase fresh fish and shrimp from the local food markets.

By engaging with the ocean, land,

rivers, lakes, and animals, Inuit learn through observation, discovery, and experience. Information about where and how to fish and hunt, and a sense of sharing and community is passed from one generation to the next. This knowledge and these values, which are hallmarks of traditional Inuit culture, are known as Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit (IQ); and Inuit in Iqaluit work hard to weave them into their daily lives. Fishing is an excellent activity for promoting these guiding principles.

The spirit of the Arctic lives on in the people of the region. It is illustrated in the true story on pages 322–323 that is the centerpiece of this article. On my first visit to the Canadian Arctic, I had been told about Pitseolak Alainga and his incredible survival story. When our family moved to the Canadian Arctic in 2001 as part of my sabbatical study, we discovered that Pitseolak and his family actually lived next door to the home we rented in Iqaluit, Nunavut.

Throughout history, storytelling has been very important to the Inuit. It is through their stories that important information is passed from one generation to the next. Hugh Brody, referring to the importance of stories for a young girl, says the following in his informative book, *The Other Side of Eden*:

The land to which she belongs is the subject of many kinds of stories. Stories about its creation, or the

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## “The Enduring Spirit of the Arctic”

Simonie Alainga was a “living Inukshuk” in the town of Iqaluit.<sup>1</sup> His wisdom about life guided many. Simonie’s superb experience and knowledge about the land and sea was only surpassed by his unending commitment to his family and community. Many Inuit talk about the efforts he put forward, especially during the Christmas holidays, to bring festive happiness to the people of Iqaluit. Titus Alooooloo, a long time friend said, “When you went into [Simonie’s] house in Iqaluit, you always saw Baffin people staying there because they felt comfortable, and they were also fed and there was always tea on the stove for anyone who came into Simonie’s house.”<sup>2</sup>

On Tuesday, October 25, 1994, Simonie Alainga, his son Pitseolak and eight others, including Pitseolak’s uncles, cousins, and good friends, boarded Simonie’s 38-foot fishing boat, the *Qaqsauq*, for a walrus hunt. They had planned to go a week earlier, but were delayed by mechanical problems. Because they would travel nearly 200 kilometers and be gone for several days, the boat was packed with food, sleeping necessities, ammunition, and fuel. Their first stop would be an outpost camp, a location two days from Iqaluit by boat. After unloading and reorganizing their provisions, the team of ten would then travel another seven to eight hours to Loks Land, their hunting spot near the mouth of Frobisher Bay. The fact that there were ten men in the hunting party had notable significance.

Among Stone Age peoples, a core-hunting group comprised approximately ten adult males in their prime. Modern society still depends on the cooperation of approximately ten adults, male or female, to accomplish major undertakings. There are ten soldiers in a platoon, eleven players on a football team, nine on a baseball team, twelve members on a jury, ten to twelve on a board of directors, and nine Supreme Court justices. Ten vigorous adults usually assure inspiration, leadership, cooperation, and purpose.<sup>3</sup>

The team of ten vigorous Inuit males set out on October 28 to hunt *Aiviq* (Walrus). Despite the rough and tumbling seas, their hunt went extremely well. It was not long before they had taken 12 walrus. Together they worked as a well-organized team; some were shooting, some were retrieving, some were skinning and butchering, while others helped to pilot *Qaqsauq*.

With the meat of 12 walrus stacked neatly aboard the boat, they began their journey back to Iqaluit on Saturday, October 29. They made slow progress as the waters continued to tumble the boat and its passengers. For whatever reason, possibly the extra weight, possibly a mechanical malfunction, the boat began to take on water. The resourceful crew quickly fired-up a gasoline generator and hooked it up to a small water pump hoping to pump the water out of the boat’s hold. At approximately 11 p.m., they sent a mayday distress signal to a nearby outpost camp at Gold Cove that their boat was taking on water. Each time they

radioed, they were uncertain if anyone heard their message, as they never received a reply.

The water pump could not handle the volume of water so some of the men began a desperate attempt to get rid of the water with five-gallon buckets. It was soon obvious that their efforts were not working, so a decision was made to abandon the *Qaqsauq* and board the 16-foot canoe boat that they had brought along for the hunt. All ten men attempted to board the canoe. The icy water splattered the canoe, nearly capsizing the boat the moment they boarded. One large gush finally toppled the boat, spilling all ten men into the rough and frigid waters of Frobisher Bay.

Wearing a green military winter parka with deep pockets, wind pants, *kamiks* (boots) tied below the knees, a baseball cap covered with a *tuque* (knitted winter hat), and seal skin mitts, Pitseolak suddenly found himself under water looking up. Billy Kownirk, wearing a floater suit, a one-piece survival outfit, was nearby. Pitseolak, realizing it was not time for him to die, somehow managed to swim to Billy and hang on to his floater suit. Together they made it back to what remained of the *Qaqsauq*. Billy pulled himself up onto a small section of the boat that was above water. Pitseolak asked Billy to help him climb aboard as well. Frightened and cold Billy said, “I have pulled myself up and you must do the same.” Pitseolak gathered his inner strength and pulled himself up along side Billy. Sharing a small piece of the boat, they began a desperate search for the other eight men, fathers, uncles, cousins, and close friends. They looked and looked for any sight of their lost relatives and companions. While they were looking, they both pondered what they should have done differently to avoid this terrible misfortune. Almost in unison, they realized it would do no good to expend energy on the past. If they were to survive, they had to look forward.

For Pitseolak and Billy, this was the beginning of a three-day passage. Their bodies, half-submerged in the icy waters of Frobisher Bay, clung desperately to the wreckage of the *Qaqsauq*. For several hours their floating abode did not move. At one point they noticed several walrus nearby staring at them. The walrus were so close they could actually look into their eyes. Both Pitseolak and Billy were concerned that one might try to ram their floating raft. This they feared would certainly mean the end, as the weight of the walrus would quickly sink what remained of the boat. The walrus, according to Pitseolak, looked as though they were hugging each other by clasping their flippers. With one eye still on the walrus, the two men noticed a group of seals nearby, which the walrus politely avoided. This behavior seemed particularly peculiar, given that walrus hunt seals. Suddenly, Pitseolak and Billy felt their vessel begin to move. It was as if the walrus had swum underneath and were helping to direct them towards land. At this point, while listening to Pitseolak, I asked him if he thought the actions of the walrus were somehow connected to the sea goddess Sedna? (The sea goddess legend is well known throughout the Arctic. It’s the story of a young woman who lived in the sea and controlled all sea creatures—specifically

seal, walrus, fish, and whale.) Pitseolak paused when I asked him this question, but he did not answer directly. He resumed recounting the events.

He had continued to pray throughout he and Billy's ordeal. It was through prayer that he found the will to live and the strength to endure. His life from about the age of nine to that moment flashed through his mind. He felt sorrow for the mistakes he had made and the anxiety he had caused others. He also felt deep love, deeper than ever before, for those near and dear to him, most especially to his wife Kootoo. It was at this point in recounting his story that Pitseolak, an upright man, husband, father, accomplished hunter and provider to many, began to cry. It was a moment that I, the listener, would never forget. It was not long until tears began to flow from all of our eyes, and there was a long pause to honor and celebrate our collective cleansing.

As Pitseolak and Billy continued to cling to the remains of the *Qaqsauq*, Pitseolak kept dipping his lower legs and feet into the icy water to keep his blood circulating. His father had taught him that because salt water freezes at a lower temperature than fresh water, he needed to keep sloshing seawater in his boots to keep his feet from freezing. Both he and Billy were cold, thirsty, and hungry. Somehow despite the hardships, they endured.

Some Inuit elders believe that Pitseolak and Billy's will to live is linked to their duty to pass their story onto others.

It's an age-old Inuit tradition that whenever there is a tragedy there are survivors who live on and tell the stories of what happened. People live to pass on the experience for future generations. Somebody had to live to tell the story. Sometimes miracles do happen... There were a lot of prayers, and they were answered.<sup>4</sup>

As word of the accident spread, the search for the missing hunters intensified. There was a mass exodus of search teams. Two twin otters (airplanes), a Hercules jet, an Aurora aircraft, a Labrador helicopter, a Canadian helicopter, a department of Fisheries and Oceans boat, and a chartered fishing boat, all took off to look for their friends and fellow Canadian citizens.

On Monday, it began to snow and a small amount began to accumulate on a section of the boat. The fresh snow provided a little water and allowed Pitseolak and Billy to quench their thirsts. Pitseolak reminded Billy to let the snow melt in your mouth before you swallow. This was another lesson his father had taught him. It was during this time that they also began to hear the engine of an airplane overhead. Because of persistent low clouds and snow flurries, however, the crew of the plane was unable to see the two survivors.

Also on Monday, with limited visibility, the search crews found debris floating in the rough seas near where the boat went missing. The *Qaqsauq's* cabin door, engine cover, and a

piece of the wheelhouse were recovered. When night fell and none of the hunters had been found, the search efforts were called-off until first light Tuesday morning.

After nearly 60 hours, half submerged in icy waters and clinging to the remains of the *Qaqsauq*, Pitseolak remembered another lesson his father had taught him. He broke a small piece from the boat's glass windshield and placed it over the dark section of one of his sealskin mitts. His hope was that during a break in the cloud cover, he could create a reflection from the sun that the plane's crew might spot. His plan worked. On Tuesday afternoon, at 1:30 p.m., the crew of the Hercules aircraft spotted Pitseolak and Billy floating about 16 kilometers from shore. A helicopter dropped a raft from overhead and guided it towards the two men. Once aboard the raft, they were picked up by a Fisheries and Oceans vessel and taken to a nearby outpost camp. Both Pitseolak and Billy were conscious and talking when their rescuers arrived. They had continued to talk to one another during their entire three-day ordeal. Because of the extreme wet and cold, their clothes were soaked through to the skin and their limbs were swollen. So swollen were their limbs that their clothing had to be cut off. From the outpost camp, they were taken by helicopter to Baffin Regional Hospital in Iqaluit. Miraculously, both Pitseolak and Billy survived.

The outpouring of family and friends that gathered to honor the eight fallen comrades and the two survivors was unlike anything Iqaluit had ever witnessed. Hundreds of folks from throughout the north and from all walks of life gathered at St. Jude's Anglican Cathedral, the nearby Parish Hall.

Before the service began, the crowd inside the church remained silent. Some cast their eyes down in respect. Others stared blankly at the front of the church, where eight white, wooden crosses leaned against the altar. Minutes before the service began, the crowd in the church reception area parted and a young man in a wheelchair was escorted to the front of the congregation.<sup>5</sup>

That young man was Pitseolak Alainga.

The bodies of the eight other Inuit hunters have never been found: Iola Nooshoota, 21; Ooletoa Pishukte, 24; Joepee Panipak, 28; Kellypalik Pishukte, 45; Sammujualie Kootoo, 52; Eepeebee Peterloosie, 56; Simonie Alainga, 57; and Johnny Shoo, 59.

#### Note

1. The phrase "living Inukshuk" seems to me to be an appropriate description for Simonie Alainga. The Inukshuk have been a prominent feature of Canada's Arctic for thousands of years. The stacked, stony profiles epitomize the words "strong" and "eternal"—sharing wisdom, knowledge and hope. Inukshuk are positioned in ways to make it obvious that they are markers. Across the Arctic, Inukshuks are used for navigation, reference points for favorite hunting and fishing locations, and to point out food caches. The Inukshuk is the official symbol for the 2010 Winter Olympic Games in Vancouver, British Columbia.
2. *The Nunatsiit News*. Iqaluit, Nunavut XOA OHO, Nov. 4, 1994.
3. Leonard Shlain, *The Alphabet Versus the Goddess* (New York: Viking, 1998), 32.
4. *The Nunatsiit News*, Nov. 4, 1994.
5. *Ibid.*, Nov. 11, 1994.





Walrus Hunters at the floe edge near Cape Dorset (Nunavut Territory, Canada).

## SPIRIT OF THE ARTIC *from page 322*

appearance of various creatures. Stories about traveling on it and living from it. She listens to her elders describe ancient times and recent times, passing on their knowledge about what this place is, what inner meanings it may hold, how best to make use of its creatures. From stories of creation and the hunt, the girl builds an image, or set of images, of her world. As in all great narratives, history, geography, personal adventure and mysteries intertwine. There are misadventures, murder, and star-

vation, to be sure, but spiritual powers and every kind of humor mean that even the worst is part of being in the best possible place, in one's own land.<sup>1</sup>

This article presents Pitseolak's true story, written to the best of my ability after he shared the story with our family in early December 2001. I am deeply grateful to Pitseolak for sharing such a heartbreaking event. Our time together was one of the highpoints of my family's time living in Iqaluit. I have supplemented what Pitseolak shared, with primary sources obtained from the archives of the

local newspaper, *The Nunatsiaq News*. The teaching suggestions accompanying this article will help students understand the setting and cultural background of the story. 📖

1. Hugh Brody, *The Other Side of Eden: Hunters, Farmers, and the Shaping of the World* (New York: North Point Press, 2001), 14-15.

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## TEACHING ACTIVITY

Using a map of Canada, show students the geographic areas mentioned in the story, e.g., territory of Nunavut, town of Iqaluit, and Frobisher Bay.

Have student research Inukshuks. Students may collect rocks and build their own small Inukshuks using clear Liquid Nails glue/cement.

Using the following websites have students research the story of the Inuit Sea Goddess Sedna, [www.hvgb.net/~sedna/story.html](http://www.hvgb.net/~sedna/story.html) or [www.arctic.uoguelph.ca/cpl/Traditional/myth/sedna.htm](http://www.arctic.uoguelph.ca/cpl/Traditional/myth/sedna.htm)

Have students discuss the importance of groups or teams of ten adult males or females. Can they name other import groups or teams that are made up of 8-12 males or females?

Have students discuss any stories that their parents or grandparents might have shared that would be very important if they were in a hazardous situation.

Have students discuss primary and secondary sources of history. Can they site examples of each from the text?