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# Arctic Diary: A Season Among the Inuit

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# Arctic Diary:

## A Season Among the Inuit

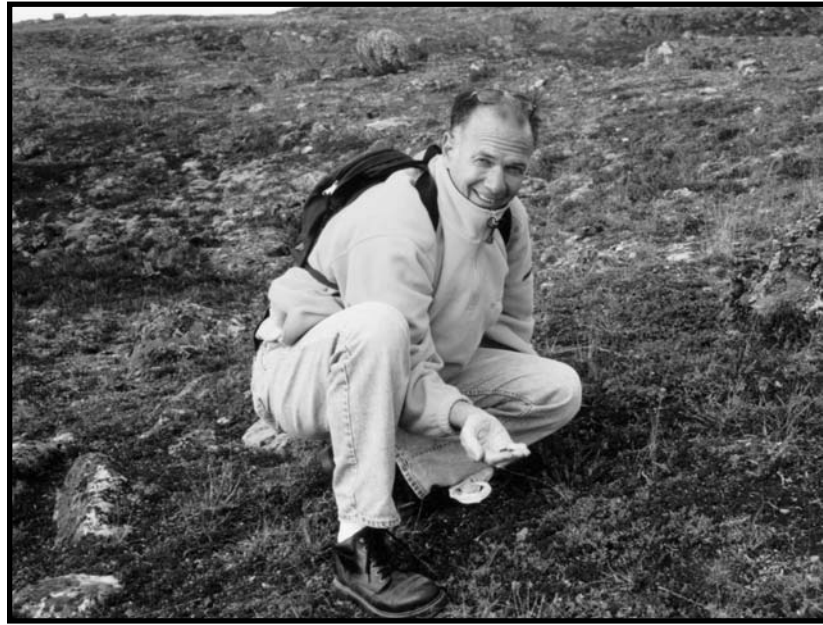
by John Kilbourne

During the fall semester, 2001, my family—my wife, Elizabeth and I, and our two young children, Zoe and Parker—spent several months living in the town of Iqaluit in the Canadian Arctic. The children attended local schools, while Elizabeth and I immersed ourselves in Inuit culture to see what we could learn.

Although my immediate reason for undertaking this unusual expedition was a desire to study the roots of traditional games and sports, my wife and I also saw our trip to the Arctic as a personal journey. Joe Robinson, in *The Une Reader*, talks about such journeys in a way that we find meaningful:

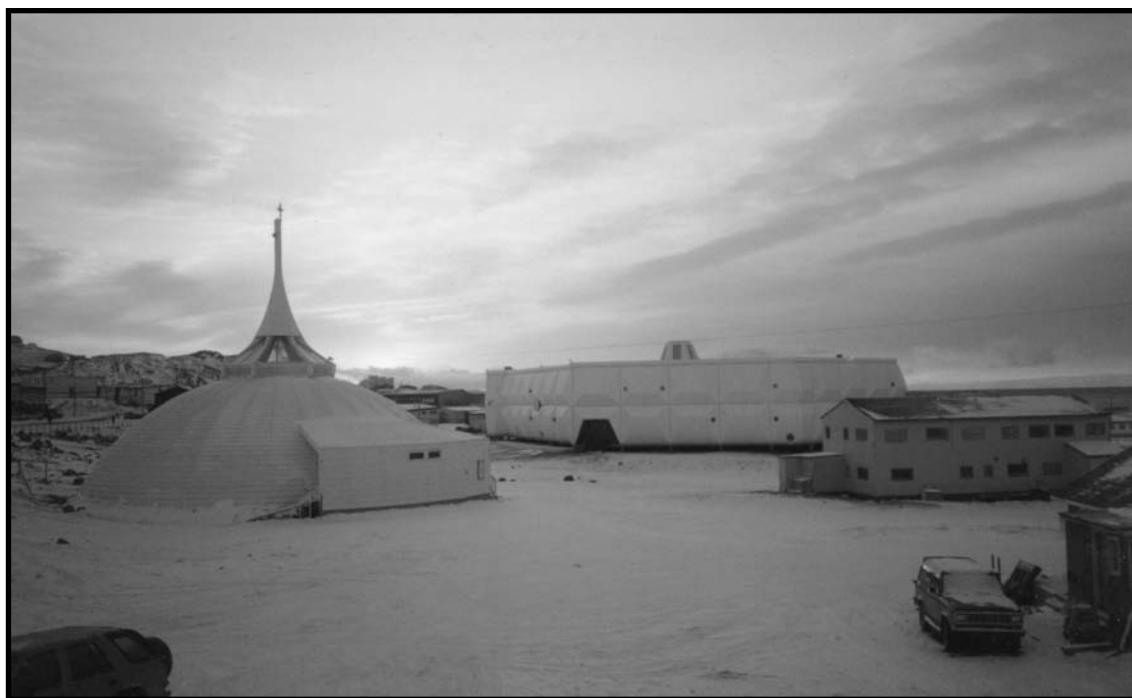
“Real travelers today are in pursuit of the original sources, in this case, places that haven’t been sanitized, ordered and commodified by modern civilization. As we get nearer to these sources we uncover deeper rhythms, which anchor us to something more than the next home entertainment purchase. Graham Greene called this a hankering for “a stage further back,” a “nostalgia for something lost.” He hit on the heart of the matter, because the drive to live an authentic life is one of the strongest of our psychological needs.”

The Inuit people were most welcoming, and we learned a great deal about their traditional culture. One fascinating experience was our participation in a weeklong workshop on traditional Inuit throat singing, taught by three women elders. Since none of the instructors spoke English, we learned by imitation. In this type of singing,



**Above, John Kilbourne picking berries on the Arctic tundra.**

**Below, Frobisher Bay.**



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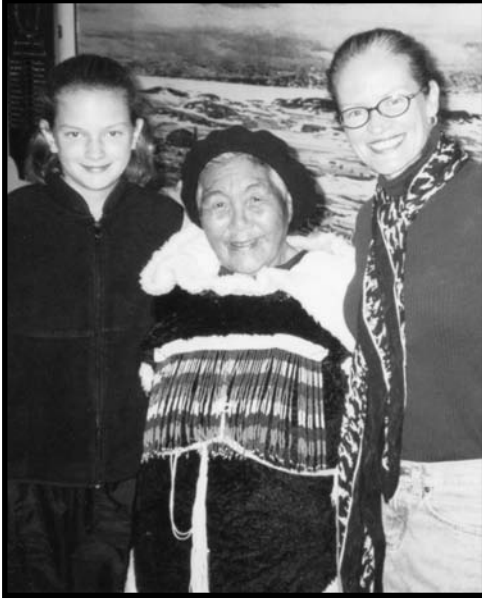
**Above, Anglican Church (left) and Nakasuk Elementary School in downtown Iqaluit.**

**Below, John and Elizabeth Kilbourne on Frobisher Bay; temperature was 45 degrees below zero.**

**Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Zoe and Elizabeth Kilbourne with Throat Singing teacher, elder Mary Siviuaripik; Inuksuk (Arctic rock sculptures that designate location and direction); Parker Kilbourne with two friends from the Nakasuk School.**

the sounds come from deep within the throat; the mouth hardly moves.

Through an interpreter, we were able to ask the instructors about the meanings of their songs. They explained that traditional throat singing was performed by women, often when the men were away hunting. Many of the sounds imitate animal sounds, such as those of gulls and geese. In addition to entertainment, the singing can take the form of competition, in which two women sing facing one another and the first to lose her concentration or laugh must sit down. Another



woman then stands up and challenges the winner. This singing game can go on for long periods of time.

It was fascinating to watch the young Inuit women learning from their elders. Using touch, sound and sight, the teachers created an excellent learning environment. The young women stood face to face with the elders, looked into their eyes, held their hands and arms, and imitated their sounds and movements. It was beautiful to observe.

Another fascinating experience was a traditional Inuit pot-luck supper and dance. When we entered the hall, a large blue tarp was spread out on the floor, covered with raw caribou, seal and arctic char. Piles of meat and innards were placed on large squares of cardboard that covered the tarp like pieces of a puzzle. Walking through the maze were two women cutting the meat into smaller pieces with their ulu knives (half-moon shaped knives with a wooden or antler handles). The Inuit made us feel perfectly welcome.

We soon discovered that the modern world has intruded on this traditional culture. Even in the remote Arctic, television has become ubiquitous. One of the friends we met, a high school teacher who had lived in the area for nearly thirty years, told us that the materialism of television—fancy automobiles, showy clothing—has had a negative effect, particularly on poor people, who have begun to express feelings of low self-esteem since television was introduced.

The exposure to televised professional hockey has also had a negative impact: our friend informed us that the change in the local sport was sudden and profound, as young Inuit boys began to imitate the violence of the



players they saw on television. Throughout Iqaluit, he said, youth sport teachers and coaches noticed more physical contact and violence and less sportsmanship.

Our months among the Inuit provided many memorable experiences and gave us a great deal to think about.

*—John Kilbourne is Associate Professor of Movement Arts, Health Promotion and Leisure Studies*