

REPORT TO SITKANS

“UP FOR DISCUSSION: WHAT MAKES A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY?”

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND INTRODUCTION

First these thanks:

Thanks to Brita and Eric, Marcel and Connie, and Trista for a sense of home and the gift of sleep in such fine quarters as they provided for my stays in Sitka.

To Dorik and Carolyn for the gift of long friendship and patience, and for their enormous assistance with arrangements for the multitude of conversations, discussions, and meetings these past two months. This was an especially busy and challenging time for the Island Institute, so their finding time to help was remarkable, and all the more greatly appreciated.

To thúy lê, The Island Institute’s writer in residence in February, 2010, for the gift of words that are lyrical, magical, and bring the truth home to both our hearts and our minds, and for her generous gift of friendship over this past month.

To all of you Sitkans who so graciously allowed me, a stranger, time in your busy lives, thanks for your gift of conversation about serious matters which you have given with remarkable openness and candor. This project has been a continual privilege, and I feel deeply honored to be involved in it.

To the Alaska Humanities Forum, a special thanks for making my time here possible and for its continuing good work throughout the state. My gratitude also to the United States Forest Service, Sitka Ranger District, for its support of a follow-up visit to Sitka May 11 – 18, 2010.

And this reminder:

This is not an academic paper. It is the outcome of a series of humanities activities designed to continue and expand a conversation with Sitkans that was begun at the Summer Institute in June 2009. The topic for discussion at that Summer Symposium was, “Framework: Shaping an Enduring Culture.” Our hope for this project was to continue the conversation about community and sustainability that began with those Sitkans who had been able to attend and to include as many others as possible who had not been participants.

Thus the meetings I had with 83 Sitkans during January and February of 2010 were conversations, not a sociological survey, nor an interview. I was trying for a mutual exchange of ideas, information, and stories rather than data collection. Those conversations, usually in The Back Door or The Highliner, reminded me that coffee, excellent as it was, is an occupational hazard in this work and should be immediately brought to the attention of OSHA.

Three folks expressed their concern about how the information they shared would be used. I assured them that I would not use any names in this report, but that the report would be made accessible to Sitkans so you would know what was said about your community, and that it would be made available to others as well. Each person spoke openly and candidly, with many personal stories to illustrate their thinking about Sitka, its past, present, and future. I owe each of you big-time.

What I have to report comes also from what I heard in meetings with several civic organizations and other public meetings, six discussion groups meeting once a week to talk over a common text, social gatherings, dinner conversations, and observations of other community events not part of the plan for this project.

Despite the number of people I talked with, and the number of Sitkans involved in other events, meetings and discussions, this report cannot pretend to be the last word on Sitka, nor even a comprehensive view of all the issues Sitkans wrestle with. Neither can it capture fully the depth of folks' passion for the place and the people here. It is simply an outsider's view of insiders' stories of what they cherish and what concerns them about Sitka's past, present and future.

I. INTRODUCTION. THE POWER OF STORIES...

I believe in the power of stories. The stories I have heard from you about Sitka are important because we may be sure that we grow into the stories we tell ourselves about who we are and what we are about – as individuals and as communities. One secret of creating an enduring culture is to choose those healthy stories that, as Koyukon linguist Eliza Jones once said in an Island Institute Summer Symposium, are “true stories that teach us how to be human.” Some of the stories I've heard from Sitkans about Sitka are of that very healthy kind. “We have learned how to work together despite our differences,” is one such story. “When tragedy strikes, we take care of those in need,” is another. Stories that create barriers to an enduring culture are also present. “We are a divisive lot,” and, “We polarize ourselves,” are two.

At the moment there is great faith that “Sitka will always be here.” “There will always be a Sitka,” many told me. Yet there are stories in the community that wound, and there are stories in the community that can heal. What Sitkans decide to tell themselves about who they really are and what they aspire to become will determine whether or not you create an enduring culture in this place. One of the great, reassuring characteristics of stories is that they can have transformative power. If we are growing into a story we do not like, we can change the story about who we are and who we would like to become, and we can grow into that better tale. That goes for communities too.

II. “HOW I CAME TO SITKA” STORIES

I've heard numerous stories about how folks came to Sitka. I believe that these are important stories, worth chronicling because they reflect important aspects of this place and this community. Among those who came here 9,000 years ago, there is pride in that long history and an allegiance to this place that runs deep through their Tlingit language and stories and psyche. I asked several Native people, as a joke, how they came to Sitka. They knew it was a joke, and laughed. But one of them reversed the joke and responded by looking terribly serious, adopting a deep sepulchral voice, and intoning, “Nine thousand years ago...” cracking up both of us.

For those who came later, many of the “How I Came to Sitka” stories reflect two things at least. One is a genuine search for an authentic life. I heard a number of stories from couples who were in their mid-twenties and thinking of families and places to put down roots and looked all up and down the west coast, the east coast, even the Midwest or the South. They'd had a glimpse of Sitka once, as tourists, perhaps, or stopping over to visit briefly with friends here, and concluded that Sitka offered what they were seeking. I heard stories from several couples who told me they had finally agreed that Sitka was where they wanted to be, even if they did not have jobs. “Let's go to Sitka anyway,” they said, “and

we'll figure out something so we can stay." They were telling me that story in their home or office or shop ten or even twenty-five or thirty years later. Though they may not have thought of themselves this way, several told me stories that indicate they were seekers. One woman declared it openly, "I've been on a spiritual quest. That's what brought me here and that's why I plan to stay." Another told me Sitka was, "The first place I ever came to on purpose. My purpose was to find my place, a test envisioning... I wanted to know, 'Is there a place for me in the world, and is it here?'"

One of the most delicious of those stories was told me by a man who described his younger self as a bit of an irresponsible ski bum, odd-jobbing around the west. He came up to Ketchikan, worked there, came to Sitka, left again for Florida where he worked on the beach, signed on as crew and sailed into a gorgeous turquoise Caribbean bay under a warm, bright sunlit sky, beautiful green mountains all around, and told me his immediate thought, surrounded by all this paradise, was, "I've got to get back to Sitka." He's been here ever since, been a solid citizen, raised a family, still runs a business.

A woman told me, with a grin, that she got here because "My parents tried to run away and hide from me." I thought that was a great first sentence for a novel. Her father had been a police officer in LA. She said:

It was stressful and dangerous and the family was threatened often. Dad became a long-haul truck driver. He called my mom and said, 'Pack the bags, we're moving to Idaho.' I graduated high school there, went to college, got married, moved to Germany, and while I was there my dad took a job as a police officer in North Pole, and they ended up in a long term position here and I came to visit them and fell in love with Sitka -- and it was pouring down rain when I did, so it was genuine.

Shortly thereafter she and her husband moved to Sitka and have remained.

One couple finally settled on Sitka, the husband told me, because, "We have a chance for a more pure democracy here. Our folks are not as influenced by money, status, and luxuries." After a thoughtful pause, he added, "I was so disappointed in national events, the way things were going..." He was not the only one who sounded that or a similar theme. Another man told me:

I was brought up here to take over the Totem Square Inn. I had many years with Marriott, Hilton, Holiday Inn... I came not only for a change in scene, but because I wanted to work for companies that want to do something more than just generate a profit. All the profits from the hotel actually go to shareholder funeral benefits and scholarships, so we are a very unique organization in the hotel portion of it... It is great to work for a corporation where the CEO drives to work in a jeep. Coming from the Marriott organization, you know, people had an imported Italian marble floor in their garage for their Ferrari collection and stuff like that; I just couldn't handle it. And Shee Atiká drives for its shareholders -- and it's not the shareholders today, it's the shareholders' grandchildren, the great-grandchildren; it's an organization that understands the value of that. Pay isn't the prime purpose for me; it's more what you do with your time on earth, and Shee Atiká understands that.

The second thing these stories indicate to me is a certain deliberateness, an intentionality, in being in Sitka, and one result of that deliberate choice has been that many Sitkans are what Wallace Stegner called "Stickers." They came to stay and have, even when things were tough. There is among many

Sitkans an allegiance to this place that though it may waver seems most often to triumph. As one woman told me, “It’s one of those places you leave for a vacation you can hardly wait for, but then you can’t wait to get back, and when you come home, you are so relieved, you just appreciate it all over again.” As another person put it, “Sitka is a self-created, select group of people...” And another said, plainly enough, “People choose to be here.”

One result of that is that Sitka is, as another person described it, “authentic.” “It’s a real town people see when they come here,” she said, “not one all gussied up for tourists.” Sitka has great historic sites and scenic beauty, yes, but what visitors find is real folks doing real things, making a life, not just a living.

III. HOW ABOUT LONG TERM?

Sitkans told me some stories that indicate powerful assets for the long run. Other stories seemed to conflict with those assets. Here’s a summary of some of the things I heard:

Assets

That intentionality I mentioned is one asset. Sitkans have a fierce sense of community that is reflected in widespread testimony I’ve heard. After I asked folks how they came to Sitka, I generally asked them why they had stayed. Almost everyone chanted a litany I heard over and over like a mantra, a chant in two verses: “It’s the scenery (the landscape, the geography, the wilderness, the nearness to mountains and ocean),” and “It’s the people (the community).”

Another area of general agreement, perhaps based in that initial appreciation for landscape, is that Sitka has a very important natural resource base. Water, wildlife, timber, fish, wilderness, even wild foods are viewed by everyone as assets that may someday become necessities for the community’s survival, one indication that some folks have long thoughts about the long term future of this place. Local food, community greenhouse gardening, fish and game resources are all cited as part of that natural resource base.

In an era when potable water is quickly diminishing around the globe, Sitka is located in a unique setting which appears to afford clean water for an unlimited future. Sitkans are considering increasing their access to electrical power by increasing hydropower already available. Further, water is in such abundance that the Sitka City and Borough Assembly has issued a contract to plan water development and transportation from Blue Lake to town, then to marine tankers for bulk sale and delivery to distant points. The plan at the moment is to raise the level of Blue Lake dam, across the island from the town, pipe the water to the harbor (that infrastructure has already been accomplished) with additional fittings that will pump it into water tankers for overseas sales. China is seen as one potential buyer. The City estimates the water available for sale is 9.5 billion gallons per year.

One man described Sitka’s potential for hydro development this way:

The City and Borough of Sitka has constructed a pipeline out to a mooring buoy in Silver Bay, offshore of the old pulp mill plant, to load tankers with bulk water. Bulk water purchasers have not consistently fulfilled their financial or contractual obligations, and petitioned the city for relief at one time or another. Bulk water

export is not yet a reality, a function of worldwide economic and environmental conditions, but the basic infrastructure is in place to allow it to happen.

There are two additional projects in the works to increase Sitka's hydroelectric generation capacity. The first is to raise the Blue Lake dam, which is reached from the Sitka Road system by a Forest Service road, about 2 miles inland from the old pulp site. This is a high priority, cost effective and accessible project which will be completed first.

The second proposal is to dam Takatz lake, which is a near saltwater on the eastern side of Baranof Island. In preparation for this project, Sitka selected land around Takatz as part of their entitlement under ANILCA. It is envisioned that Takatz would provide electricity for a SE power grid as well as Sitka. A lot of mountains, glaciers, icefields and avalanche paths sit between here and there, so construction and maintenance costs will be high.

Interestingly, Congress and the Obama administration did not include any hydropower projects in the list of "renewable energy" infrastructure that the administration chooses to support with subsidies. I suppose this is a reflection of the dam-buster perspective endorsed by many environmentalists in the South 48. The ecological costs of dams on our short, steep, island streams are orders of magnitude less than for dams on larger river systems like the Columbia, and certainly less than the use of alternate, conventional energy sources. The good news is that Senator Begich has introduced a bill to separate dams into two categories based on their ecological footprint. Both Sitka projects would be classed as beneficial, and thus available for federal renewable energy project subsidies.

Water, in this case, is not just a natural resource for community use, but an enormous potential economic asset as well. Alternative energy is on Sitka's doorstep; increased hydropower is a foregone conclusion and wind, tidal, and even solar are other potential supplements I heard discussed.

Everyone who has been here any length of time has witnessed powerful divergences of opinion, sometimes with anger and animosity amply expressed. Several folks told me that they see that divisiveness as an asset. "I think of myself as a centrist," one man said. "I like to be close to the middle. "I have guns, but I've never belonged to the NRA for instance (I see no excuse for automatic weapons. Who needs a three round burst to get a deer?). I need the far left AND the far right so I know where the middle is." He attributed a shift to the left in the political climate to the loss of blue collar and industrial management jobs following the closure of the pulp mill in 1993. That has depleted the strength of more conservative sectors of the community in his view, a story I heard from others as well.

Another story I heard often reflects a deep sense of pride in Sitkans' willingness to pitch in to help people facing especially hard times or tragedy. Though someone in serious economic or health difficulties was your enemy, even exchanging barbed insults over some issue, you help when help is needed. A woman told me, "There are diverse opinions in this town... but we are tight knit and we do watch out for our own... We really try to help our own."

That sense of community is also reflected in a pretty common agreement that, as one person put it, “When push comes to shove and things get desperate, Sitkans will sit down and figure out how to deal with a problem.” Another said, “What’s going to sustain us is our ability to work together... There is a spirituality to this place that transcends our divisiveness or animosity,” he declared. “Sitka goes to the ocean, to whales, herring, eagles, bears... gets itself together.” Nevertheless, a woman also warned, “It takes a lot of people working together to make a community work.”

There is a sense among many Sitkans that population size is part of what makes concern for others essential and possible. The town is small enough that you cannot afford to offend another too greatly. As one man put it, “You can’t just flip somebody the bird who cut you off at the traffic circle” – because you are going to run into them later in the grocery store or next day at the coffee shop. Current population has been just above 8,000, but appears to be declining slightly. Folks are concerned about that for the decline appears to be greater among young married couples, and their absence has an impact on the school district and its finances. Yet no one I talked to wants the town to grow too much. A number of folks indicated that nine or ten thousand is about the maximum size for the town because of the limitations imposed by geology and geography – and, perhaps more importantly – most everyone feels that is also “the maximum size for Sitka to remain Sitka.” Several of you have mentioned that, “Larger than that, and the sense of community life we cherish now would fade,” as one person put it.

Folks in Sitka are great participants in the civic culture. There are approximately a hundred and twenty informal, ad hoc, and non-profit organizations in this community, representing a wide variety of interests and concerns. Inevitably they sometimes step on one another’s toes, but it also means that there is a place for nearly everyone to be genuine citizens of Sitka, participants in matters of concern both to them and to the community. That capacity to express oneself about special interests or concerns was mentioned by several as what initially drew them to this town.

That means Sitka is event-ridden; it has an amazing vitality. Ninety-Nine meetings a week (a slight exaggeration), and a dozen other activities, consume many. No one can take in everything they’d like to. There is a wide-spread appreciation of the role of the arts. Sitka has some of the best musicians, visual artists, and writers not only in Alaska but across the country. Witness the Monthly Grind, a showcase for Sitka artists to perform through the winter. Concerts, exhibits, and books are prominent features of this town. A number of writers here have national reputations. Old Harbor Books is, by my lights (and on this one thing at least, I qualify as an expert), one of the three best book stores on the northwest coast for anyone interested in Alaskana or in literature (Elliott Bay and Powell’s would be the others).

But Sitka’s appreciation is not limited to the arts; the humanities as well as science and technology are powerfully important elements in this community. No other organization in Alaska has brought more outstanding national and international thinkers to the state than The Island Institute. Any Sitkan who has not taken advantage of that, has seriously missed out. For 25 years this community of 8,000 has had access to many of our best national and international brains, and there is nothing I know of as intellectually rich in any town of 25,000 in the Lower Forty-Eight. There are major universities that don’t do it any better than Sitka has. And South East Alaska Regional Health Consortium (SEARHC), University of Alaska Southeast (UAS), the U.S. Forest Service, and Sitka Sound Science Center are testimony to Sitkans’ interest in science and technology, especially the kind that explores possible uses of the natural resources that are available, and seeks to promote public health.

Sitka has organizations with considerable energy working on local foods, alternative energy, ocean acidification and reducing our carbon footprint. All that participation in civic life and organizations may be greater on a per capita basis than any place I've ever been. I would be dead wrong to say that Sitkans have an interest in this place. It would be closer to the truth to say Sitkans are powerfully passionate in Sitka, about Sitka, for Sitka, and for their lives here. I can say with absolute certainty that apathy is not a major problem for this community because I am given (sometimes) to massive British understatement.

There is confidence among its citizens about Sitka's future. Numerous people declared that "Sitka will always be here," or "Things will change, but there will always be a Sitka." This was a standard response from Sitka's Tlingit population. That confidence, for them, was based in an ongoing faith in their capacity to provide for themselves through subsistence activities, although there was some concern that younger people were not learning subsistence practices, or turned away from them because they are too hard. "You have to really work," a Tlingit woman pointed out, but "the compensation includes not only close ties to the land and good food, but companionship and fellowship as we work together."

Nevertheless, as one Tlingit elder put it, "Whether the future is bright or not, we're going to be here. You have to be flexible. With the partnerships we have established with the city and with subsistence – that traditional knowledge is huge... that's a huge thing. This is our home." But many non-Native Sitkans, too, mentioned the availability of game and fish, building materials, and fresh water as essential elements that can be used by everyone to prevent hunger if the worst case scenarios about the end of cheap oil that will limit transportation to and from this isolated community are realized.

A businessman, commenting on the long term said that "People choose to stay here, even at reduced income. The arts, the scenic landscape, the distinct groups of people they hold us. What's going to sustain Sitka is our allegiance to Sitka, because this really is a great place."

These are rich assets for the long term. For me, the capacity to work together Sitkans described in our conversations trumps everything else including the economy. If the economy goes seriously in the tank, that capacity to work together will mean that no one will starve. As one person told me, "Then the fishermen will see that we get fish, the hunters will see that we get deer, the garden folks will see we get potatoes. At least we won't starve."

Anomalies, oxymorons, contradictions, and concerns

Rather than impediments to creating a sustainable community here, I want to mention what seem to me to be anomalies, oxymorons, or contradictions in the stories I heard. These issues I raise are not raised as criticisms, but as observations, some things I heard that Sitkans need to be aware of as you work toward creating a sustainable community. Local food, alternative energy, and reducing the carbon footprint are important to that effort, but they are only fragments of what it takes to create a sense of community and to move toward sustainability.

The environmental prospect

Ocean acidification and the end of cheap oil are huge international, global, issues that Sitka cannot rectify on its own, but Sitkans do worry about ocean acidification and the end of cheap oil, and think hard about how to reduce our carbon footprint. My daughter Stephanie and I got to sit in on a community meeting about that, and we were both impressed. Here were 26 Sitkans engaged in a

very thoughtful, well informed, discussion about what role they could play, however small, to alleviate acidification. It is an important consideration for this ocean dependent community.

Steph and I also attended a lecture by University of Alaska Fairbanks scientist Dr. Jeremy Mathes who has been studying acidification in the Gulf of Alaska, and learned that the margin of risk is shown in the pH factors in the water. The shell of the pteropod, a tiny hard shelled phytoplanktonic snail approximately a centimeter long, like all shellfish, is made of calcium carbonate (CaCO_3) and there is increasing evidence that CO_2 in sea water deteriorates CaCO_3 shells. The absorption of CO_2 in the water creates carbonic acid which in turn slightly lowers the pH of sea water, gradually inhibiting the formation of CaCO_3 shells. When the ocean pH reaches 7.5 – 7.8, we were informed, hard shelled marine life cannot produce the shells required for their survival. The current levels in the Gulf of Alaska (and possibly just off Sitka), are 8.0 – 8.2 and declining. Pteropods are crucial to a whole network of interdependent sea creatures. Salmon, halibut and herring, three species important to Sitkans for both commerce and subsistence, depend on hard shelled sea life such as pteropods, also called “sea snails” or “sea butterflies,” for their food supply.

On the other front, oil depletion, a resident pointed out, “Sitka imports ninety percent of its consumables and it exports ninety percent of its waste. Even off the grid, we are totally dependent on oil.” A business man acknowledged in our conversation that the end of cheap oil “Scares the dickens out of me. I think about it every day.” Another pointed out, “We can be off the grid electrically, but that doesn’t solve our transport problem yet.”

A commercial fisherman, looking to the future (“When your kids are having kids,”) said, One of the things fishing teaches you is... the world is a dynamic place. Even in fishing, you know, we used to use J hooks. Then somebody invented circle hooks and now we use circle hooks. We used to fish in 24 hour derbies; now you have to buy the right to fish, a specific amount of fish, but you’ve got a nine month season, and you’re able to get a better price and service the market better. So things have changed a lot in technology, crew size, the methods and everything, so I think there will be fishing going on for a long time, but what it will look like? Something different than we see today probably...

The technology makes us more efficient, but then, you know, we’ve got to be on a sustainable level with the fish and that’s what it’s all about. How we catch them may change, but the amount we catch has to be based on what can sustainably be harvested...

I think there will be a Sitka. Be interesting to see what drives the economy at that point. Part of it will be resource based as it is now. I mean, even if the ocean gets more acidic, there’s going to be some critters that like that, and some that don’t, so you’ll probably see a shift, but that’s kind of the history of everything; it changes. I think energy – I think Sitka sits in a pretty good spot for that. I know it costs a lot to build alpine hydro dams, but we have a lot potential here. Someone said Alaska should just be in the business of putting little wind turbines on all these islands, then crack the seawater for hydrogen and export hydrogen to the world. If they ever come through on that, you could see something like that happening in Sitka... Can fishing last? I don’t know... Things change; how do we achieve sustainable harvest levels of resource development?

The Sitka Sound Science Center, commercial fishermen's organizations, Sustainable Sitka and the Global Warming Group, have all been working on those issues thoughtfully and carefully.

The social prospect

In addition to the difficulty in reconciling Sitkans' confidence in natural resources and the increasing threats to marine life, there are social issues that threaten the long term future of the community. They show us that the environment is not the only element essential to an enduring culture; social issues are another important factor. Sitkans recognize that they can also be contentious, even violent, mean spirited, and frequently disrespectful. That is reflected in three things that I heard about early on from many people: divisiveness, racism, and domestic violence.

Divisiveness

As I have moved through Sitka, often a couple or more times a year for almost 20 years, I have been witness to some sharp disagreements. Most Sitkans acknowledged that in our conversations, and told me new stories. Animosity has not always been well controlled in contentious times. Anger flashes, names get called, people get hurt. The pulp mill was perhaps the classic example of that; the bridge (whether or not to have one), years before, was another. There are still clashes, and some few folks on either side still exercise poor judgment and exacerbate the problem rather than working it through. Though the pulp mill has been settled for 15 years, and there is broad agreement that the antagonisms have largely abated, a number of people have also indicated that some of those old animosities still linger.

As one man, talking about that divisiveness, put it, "We polarize ourselves." I've heard about the current, serious tensions between the charter fleet and the commercial fishermen featuring bumper stickers almost pornographic in their meanness. There are tensions between subsistence users of herring and commercial herring boats and regulators. Whether to put in another dock to accommodate additional cruise ship traffic has already precipitated antagonism and disappointment. Road construction and repair have generated heat. The City Assembly has heard arguments over whether or not to purchase The Hames PE Center. Those who use it regularly support that expenditure and see it as a public health issue; those who do not use it see the Center as a frill and oppose it.

Another man described a primary division as being, "The empowered versus the entitled." He told me, "The empowered find ways to make things work; they will look for whatever work they can do in order to be here and stay. The entitled sit back and assume they should be given something; they want a job handed to them." In his view, "Every issue will have these two sides. So we have to find a way to work together."

We have to ask, "How do these antagonisms or potential antagonisms fit with the reports that 'We can work together,' and, 'We take care of each other?'" One person put an answer colorfully: "I mean," she said emphatically, "there are diverse opinions in this town, to the point where some people are yelling at each other, but still, somebody needs help in this town – oh, there's a few outcasts I think nobody would help because they are just not nice people – but 98, maybe 99 percent, no matter what the differences are, you still are civil and think about dealing with them."

A long time resident had a similar view, perhaps a bit more optimistic. She told me, “Sitkans are passionate people, but extreme people on both sides are coming closer, and the number of folks in between the extremes is increasing.” In her view there have been positive changes over the years. “When I was in school, there was really nothing in this town.” But time and change have combined in good ways. “Now we have good transportation; there are clothing stores, restaurants; music and arts events; the internet is here... There is a softening of strict opinions. Now, when the economy is touching everybody, we are getting together.”

Racism

I heard from some that Sitka has dealt with its racism over the years. Others have not seen such success, and told me, “No way. Racism is still here and still powerful.” At first I was puzzled and saw those views as contradictory. I was impressed that the folks who were saying racism still exists were not Native. For a time, I thought both views were right; the racism that was clear in the 1970’s seems much less overt, and Native people have told me about gains in having a voice at the table of City government. The bi-annual meetings between the tribal and city governments to check on issues of concern are a case in point. A Native official said, “It’s important to be at the table; when you are at the table, having a cup of coffee, getting acquainted, being asked, ‘What do you think?’” He continued, “We’re lucky to be where we are now. We’re a unique place. We’ve come a long way.” He pointed to collaborations that are being worked at or worked out: “Tourism service, the police, Healing House; we cooperate on domestic violence and with the Park Service and Forest Service...”

Despite those gains, I was also told on the other hand, that the racism was just more subtle now. How do these two views of racism in Sitka fit together? Are they an oxymoron? Perhaps the best analysis of that issue was put to me like this:

I think Sitka is similar to America as a whole, where racism used to be very much out there, in public, with signs and such, and I think now it is back in homes. I don’t think it has gone away; I think it still exists somewhat firmly in private homes, but I don’t think you see it as much out in public.

We just lost Dr. Kitka; you talk about a big man, a gentleman that worked hard for Sitka, primarily for Sitka Natives, but secondarily a real gentleman in that group who understood Sitka and what made it unique and really worked hard for the whole community. We hear our Assembly talking about Sitka City Assembly as a brother or sister government and trying somehow to interact with a fellow government and such, and they’re fine words, but then you see someone like Dr. Kitka pass and you don’t see anyone from our city attend the services of such a great man who really helped set up ANB and so many things.

So I’m glad it’s not so overt; I’m glad there are some protections, and I appreciate the Alaska Constitution giving us the ability to say, ‘We have shareholder preference,’ and being able to say legally that if you have two candidates for a job and one is a shareholder, by all means let’s hire the shareholder and move them up the ladder and give them some experience.

But I don’t know how many generations it will take before we get it out of the homes and get rid of it once and for all.

I do not mean to make too much of this, but the herring issue tends to fall out primarily along racial lines although some non-natives also harvest herring eggs. For years Native people have witnessed the decline of the accessible herring harvest which once lined the Southeast Alaska coast for miles. The history of Native herring harvest is a long and rich part of their tradition and the places they can go to find herring eggs are now diminished. A ninety-six year old man, sitting before his big picture window only a few yards from the beach, told me there used to be herring eggs a foot and a half deep at the tide line in front of his house. Now there are none.

A person on the regulatory side of fish and game said over lunch, “It is funny that the herring population is so abundant right now, especially in the Sitka area. That’s not true everywhere... When you look at the historic maps that we have, it seems like they do seem patchy. That is, they spawn in an area for a time and then they’ll be gone awhile, and then they come back again.” She continued, “The department does have a harvest strategy. If the population gets below a certain level, the commercial fishing stops but subsistence fishing can still go on. So I hope we’re doing the right thing.”

Commercial harvesters and our culture’s science are very new on the herring scene; Tlingit observation of herring is older by millennia. The two assessments seem contradictory. Though this year’s herring population may be the “largest ever seen,” by scientists, that does not mean that herring are more plentiful than they ever have been. The long term view of Tlingits is that the population is greatly reduced since traditional times. Some recent science seems to support their view but is not widely shared by other scientists and has not yet been incorporated into state policy. Since many other species in the fisheries depend on herring, one man asked, “What will become of the salmon if the herring are gone? What will become of the halibut?” Those seem legitimate questions.

And the differing hopes of Natives and non-Natives about Sealaska in-lieu land selections is disquieting. It is complicated because there are non-Natives who are eager for social justice for Tlingit people and their claims and would like to support them, and there are Native people who are disturbed over Sealaska’s record of timber use. So there are divisions in both communities over this difficult issue. One encouraging sign is that everyone seems – at the moment I write this – inclined to be very careful in their rhetoric and trying to avoid this becoming another racial divide. The nagging worry is that in a community with a history of divisiveness and racism (both white toward Native and Native toward white) this issue could erupt into a painful dissension that may not abate for generations.

Domestic Violence

Sitkans take care of one another when people are facing tragedy, I’ve heard often. There are touching stories of a financially strapped family’s bill mysteriously waved at the check-out counter in the grocery store. Or stories of people facing the tragedy of lethal illness who are helped with their expenses, even by people who don’t like them or by people they fight with over community issues. That’s a story I heard often in our conversations.

But visiting the women’s shelter and the chief of police, I also hear that Sitkans beat each other up regularly, and Sitka has a high rate of domestic abuse. The largest number of police calls, by a significant amount, is about domestic violence. One person, not associated with the Women’s Shelter, told me “The amount of shelter bed time we have in this town is astronomical. As much as I like to see the rosy side of Sitka, what happens inside of houses can be horrendous.”

One has to wonder, how do Sitkans reconcile those two views of this town as a place where we take care of each other and also abuse each other at a high rate? People tell me that a lot of the domestic violence is related to alcohol or drug abuse, as if that made it excusable or the problem could be laid to alcohol or drugs, and was not a personal/communal responsibility. But I think, OK, yes, alcohol or drugs are involved -- but so what? That does not tell me that the community can therefore ignore the issue, and Sitka clearly has not done that. Yet there is clearly a degree of tolerance for such behavior in the community. There has not been community outrage sufficient to stem that tide of abusive behavior.

Is it possible that spouses and children who suffer abuse are not really seen as part of “our town?” Are both abuser and abused outside the community, beyond its inclusion? Yet both the abused and abuser are tragic figures. One person told me something that matches my own experience in Anchorage: “It seems like people either live with it, or are so removed from it through how we view the world that it could be your neighbors but if you don’t want to look at it, you don’t see it. Then, when you see it, you find out it is all around you, but somehow we insulate ourselves from it... The culture sort of insulates people, you know, because people don’t want to talk about that... People who really think about it don’t think it is OK. But by the fact that many people don’t think about it, they just let it happen and therefore condone it. But how do you get people to talk about it and think about it?”

Sitkans Against Family Violence strives to awaken Sitkans to the issue and has an Outreach Coordinator available to talk with organizations about the problem. The District Attorney’s office also has a paralegal who works on domestic violence issues. Effective as they are, these efforts need all the help they can get from the greater Sitka public.

If Sitkans are folks who pitch in to help victims of tragedy, they cannot turn away from neighbors caught up in domestic violence. Creating shelters is not enough. They are hugely important, and they are doing good work, but the continuing necessity for them tells us that they are not enough. Somehow the community has to make known that such behavior is “not acceptable in our town,” and that community effort cannot be done solely by the staff of such places. They are busy enough taking care of the walking wounded.

Such issues are painful to look at, more painful to acknowledge; many just ignore the problem, do not know of it, or turn away from it. Yet some individuals are trying to help. One of the great, encouraging stories I heard is about the Sitka Police Department. This not a story I heard first from the police department, but from others. It begins in my own experience in this town back in the mid seventies when I talked with Sitka women who were very concerned because the police then, as in many cities across the nation, were of the “blame the victim” school. Women who had been raped or abused were reluctant to report it because they were going to be treated as perpetrators rather than victims, and nothing would be done for justice. The stories I’ve heard this time indicate that over the last few years that has been changing. A woman who knows these issues and is concerned about them told me, “The police are learning.” And the Director of the shelter told me, “The chief now may show up at the shelter and say, ‘I just got this RFP; maybe we can work together on a proposal and do something about this...’” That is a significant and very gratifying shift in attitude.

Every community has its dark corner of violence. We will never eradicate that darkness entirely, but it can be reduced through broad community acknowledgement, discussion, and effort. Maybe it is time for a larger effort by Sitkans to pitch in and say, “Not in our town” to abusive behavior.

In a letter a Sitkan, summarized this issue with a question:

Many of the dramas acted out behind closed doors are expressions of deep compulsions and bent or twisted human nature... the heart of human darkness if you will. Sociologists tell us that much adult behavior is formed in our early years... that we are products of our heredity and environment. The question I would ask is a practical one, "How does a community modify the private compulsions and behaviors that lead to "domestic violence?""

Besides these three major issues, there are additional matters of serious concern to Sitkans.

The economic prospect

Once again, I have heard conflicting testimony, this time about the economy. In early conversations when I asked about the economy, the response was talk about tourism and the fisheries. But in other conversations additional elements showed up: SEARHC, the Sitka Tribe and all its affiliated activities, Shee Atiká, the school district, the federal and state governments, and the community hospital are all important features of the local economy. So the economy is more diverse than it appears at first blush, and that is a powerful asset for the long term.

At the same time there is recognition of this diversity, there is concern that it might diminish. I heard reports that the Forest Service and SEARHC are moving personnel to Juneau, perhaps even to Anchorage. According to a Sitka Economic Development Corporation publication, of the eight employers with over one hundred employees, six are government, two are private businesses. Of those six government employers, three are state or federal, the rest part of the City and Borough of Sitka. That would justify concern about the loss of government jobs.

I've heard concern about declining revenues (25 – 30 percent in tourism in 2009) from both Assembly members and merchants. Everyone acknowledges that tourism is a critical leg of Sitka's economy, but there is disagreement about how to fix that, and there are expressions of pain and antagonism over just what tourism in Sitka ought to look like. As one man said, "The short term for tourists is not good. We need some industry here, besides tourism and the government."

Another pointed out, "As I wrap myself around what makes a strong community, what makes a strong community is not getting overextended, and being very cautious in how you manage your money. And that's where I see Sitka failing... overspending."
He went on to explain,

I'll give you an example: Sitka historically -- and I can look at it from almost a sixty year perspective -- has always been pretty socially liberal and fiscally conservative. Cared about our neighbors but didn't want to spend a lot of money on stuff we didn't need. If you drive by and look at the fire hall, it's probably the prettiest fire hall in the State of Alaska. We paid cash for it. Recognized the need, saved the money, and paid cash.

Now, I contrast that with what I see today on the Assembly. What I see, on the night the Assembly was told that for the second quarter sales tax we'd be off \$145,000, they turned around and gave \$145,000 to non-profits. That's a \$300,000 swing in the

budget and no one made any reference to that or showed any cognitive awareness that could be a problem. The third quarter was even worse. You've got the global recession, tourism was down; you've got this perfect storm and no understanding of the implications of it... There is an inherent misconception that you always have to cut back, rather than look at what you can do to increase revenues – and not on the tax side.”

On the other hand, the Assembly members I talked with expressed their own concerns about the economy. They knew that cruise ship revenues were down; the demands made upon the budget from many sectors of the community were apparent to them, and there were steps being considered to increase revenue for the long term.

Another person characterized the economic dilemma this way:

It's very easy for the cruise lines to go the inside passage, and that's my concern; that we're going to get forgotten. I worry the only people who can stay here and make an income are people who can live completely off the land (and then where are they going to live?), or people with enough wealth they can afford to stay here and they don't really mind some inconveniences. It's going to be a bedroom community for the rich.

The city's already getting hit hard. Tax revenues are way down. It's not looking good; there are going to be job cuts involved, and I think unfortunately we are reaping the benefits, or lack thereof, of the last ten years of behavior in regard to outside industries moving in. We can't be on our own and maintain a lively, vibrant economy. It's a poor climate for business. We're fortunate. If everything goes wrong, you've got the fishing here; you've got the hunting. You can survive here if you need to, and that's a comforting thing. There are opportunities here; it's just not what it once was. Change, you need it; if you stagnate, you die.

Other people find other ways to express their concerns. One person told me, “The challenge is to adapt to reality. Revenues are down. How we address this problem will determine how we look ten years from now. Charters are going down, cruise ships...” But he added a more cheerful note: “This community has been solving its problems. One of the things that sustains this community is our capacity to live close to the land.”

Another told me, “When I first came in '77 my sense of Sitka was – SJ was open, the pulp mill was going – more secure. Things were affluent; there wasn't that queasy feeling in the pit of your stomach. Now there is a queasy sense in the pit of my stomach... Can beggars be choosers? I don't see industries knocking on our door. It's helpful to have an economic driver.”

Yet another issue facing Sitka is housing, especially affordable housing.

According to Sitka Economic Development Association, the average price of a home in 2007 was \$293,205; a multifamily home cost \$250,985. A one bedroom apartment rented for \$837, two bedrooms for \$999. Yet average per capita income in 2005 was \$33,115. Several folks expressed their concerns that after their children graduate and go off to college, many of them would like to come back to Sitka. Where will they find jobs in this small town, and where will they be able to live?

How can they find work that will allow them living space unless they become fully professional and can work in SEARHC or one of the federal jobs?

One veteran of the struggle for affordable housing told me, “Sitka needs a strong comprehensive plan. What we have is a wish list...” He continued,

The Long Range Planning Commission has not been able to develop a relationship with the City Assembly or Administration in order to try to do this... The Assembly said, “We need economic development and we need a business to come here,” but you need a lot more than that. It’s got to be a comprehensive approach. Under current conditions, in the private industries here, not all the positions are going to be highly paid, so you need affordable housing and that type of thing...

An example of some potential coordination is like... the city may have some land they want to develop, but they don’t have the money. So when I went with Baranof Island Housing Authority (BIHA, pronounced Bee-Ha), we talked quite extensively about the Housing Authority bringing in HUD money to build the infrastructure on City land, then the City could give lots to BIHA, and that would be a fair exchange. There needs to be more of this collaboration. The affordable housing issue is really very critical.

BIHA has brought in probably \$35 million in its lifetime, and provided many jobs in developing the program. We attempted to get some assistance from the City and that’s – I don’t mean to get too critical – but oftentimes they don’t think very long range. In bringing in HUD money and having the housing funded under a unique system where it’s leased to purchase, I think there are now about 35 homes that are funded fully, so that brings a real solid, growing tax base.

And the affordable housing helps other areas. For example, we made a survey, not recently, maybe six years ago, of our affordable housing residents who were Native, and parents of 85 children said they couldn’t live here without the housing. Now, if the school district fell by 85 children that would be a big loss to the school system. Also making the housing affordable, rather than having to spend 50 percent of their income for housing, we hold it down to 33 percent, and that allows them to be a viable part of the community. So it goes back to the comprehensive plan. It’s got to be really comprehensive and consider all the impacts and relationships between these things.

The Question of Community: Whose community are we really talking about here?

Sitkans love their community, even if it is divisive and contentious. Yet there is racism, moved perhaps from the public eye to the private home. There are economic differences, with a growing gap between the haves and have-nots. Tell me if I’m wrong, but when I hear many folks talk about the attractions of this community – that it is partly the scenery, yes, but it is also the people, the fact that we take care of our own, that we can work together despite our differences, that we are well educated -- these descriptions are given by Anglos talking primarily about their own non-Native, non-Filipino community. Is it possible that the other two major groups don’t mention such things so much because it is so ingrained in their cultures that they are hardly conscious of them?

Then I have to wonder, “What really constitutes the Sitka community?” From many of the conversations I’ve had it seems hard to see Sitka as a single community; easier, perhaps, to see it as three communities: Anglo, Tlingit, Filipino. One of those, the Anglo, is most visible and most vocal. The second, the Tlingit, representing 20 percent of the population, is prominent, important to the economy and social life, but somewhat less visible, and despite many cooperative or collaborative efforts, has much business of its own to conduct. Though it shares many ceremonies, or leaves them open to all, its ceremonies are often ignored by others. The third, the Filipino community, is faintly visible but largely unknown to many Sitkans. It is an important economic source of employees for local businesses, but does not have the capital or the internal civic and economic businesses or organizations (such as BIHA), to allow it to make the large economic contribution to the community that some others do.

I asked a number of folks for the name of a member of the Filipino community I could contact, and the first dozen could not tell me. They knew faces, but not names, or they knew first names from the tags on clothing or uniforms, but not last names. The near anonymity of the Filipino community is less a racial or ethnic matter, I think, than a linguistic and economic one. A Filipino woman I did speak with confirmed that many Filipinos do not participate in the social or civic affairs of Sitka “because they are working two or three jobs. They have no time to go to meetings.” They have to do that because “One job doesn’t pay the bills; the second one fulfills that obligation and provides some extra to send home.” If there is a third job, it allows, “savings toward a trip home with enough money to look good to relatives and acquaintances back there.” Many in the Filipino community are uneasy about their English. They may speak it passing well, but worry about inadequate or inaccurate grammar and punctuation when writing.

One consequence of that is that though they may be educated for administrative or management positions in the Philippines, where their language skills are appropriate and apparent, the more visible clerical, administrative, or management jobs are not open to them here. They work labor and service occupations in the grocery stores, the hospitals, the schools, the laundromat, the fish processors. When among English speakers, they speak English; at home they speak their own language, which has many dialects. The Philippines remain of primary importance to them, and they have Filipino channels on their television sets here. They keep up with Filipino politics and follow the celebrity gossip in the Philippines as eagerly as we Americans keep up with ours. “They are not about to go to a meeting about ocean acidification in Sitka.” When they do go home, they want to visit as peers with the administrative or management relatives and friends they left behind. Sitka is seen as a good place to accomplish all that, and a good number of Filipino folks have moved to Sitka from Kodiak, Juneau, or other large Alaskan Filipino communities.

Each of the three communities pretty much maintains its own language use, and that is a good thing. Loss of language is a severe blow to any culture. I met a Tlingit woman in her thirties who was taking lessons, learning her own language. One occasionally hears Tlingit or Tagalog when passing on the street, or when folks are talking among themselves at their work place. The two smaller groups are much more adept at the dominant language than the larger culture is adept at Tlingit or Tagalog. But chatting with grocery store clerks – always described as so cheerful, friendly, and helpful – is not the same as being in community with them. Perhaps Sitka is really several separate communities: Anglo, Tlingit, Filipino, the victims of domestic abuse, the perpetrators... and includes some others even less acknowledged: children with special needs, the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered community, the lonely...

Finally there is this matter of mutual respect.

Not flipping another the bird because you are going to run into them in the grocery tomorrow is not the same as not flipping the bird because no one deserves the bird; that is, courtesy is one simple way to practice respect, even when you are offended by another's behavior – a spiritual and psychological discipline that increases our capacity to show respect and to create a richer sense of community.

There seems to be a growing disparity in class: more professional people with good wages; fewer blue collar workers, a growing gap between high wage folks and low wage folks. A business man remarked that Sitka has been, "in a transitional stage for the last 20 years. The community has changed. When the pulp mill closed we lost a large portion of our blue collar workers and their value system is gone too. Now the trend is toward transient professionals." Then he asked, "They may get some fine things started or built, but will they be around to pay the bills for those things?" A component of this change may also be a shift in political views. "I look around and I don't see the far right anymore," one man told me. These growing disparities reveal one more reason to practice respect if Sitka hopes to become a sustainable community. They make that practice more difficult, and thus even more essential.

Overall...

Overall, Sitkans are optimistic about the future of their community. Despite threats and obstacles, they believe Sitka, and their place in it, will be around for the long term. I asked over 70 folks to make a rating. "On a scale of 0 to 10, if 0 is pessimism and 10 is optimism, where would you put Sitka?" All but five rated Sitka's future between seven and nine. No one gave it a ten, but the average was a fair country eight. Among the other five were two who claimed to be "naturally pessimistic." One gave Sitka a four, the other a two. Two people asked if they could "divide the question," as one man put it. I asked what he had in mind, and he replied, "Well, can I rate the nation and the world apart from Sitka, even though I know Sitka depends on the rest of the world?" I said, "Do it." He immediately said, "The rest of the world is not going to make it. I give it a zero. Sitka I'd give a two." The other gave Sitka a four, the rest of the world a two. The only woman who admitted to being a pessimist gave Sitka a two.

Most of the optimism was based on the natural resources available for subsistence. The U.S.D.A.'s Forest Service estimates that of all the people living in South East Alaska, ninety percent utilize the mountains, tide lines, and ocean for subsistence uses. There are many, both Native and non-Native, who know and use subsistence skills. So as long as acidification is held in abeyance, the plant, animal, and fisheries resources are managed well, and that clear fresh water holds out, optimism may well be justified.

IV CONCLUSION

Sustainability

In our conversations my task was to listen as carefully as I could to your views, and I tried to do that. I hope this report reflects fairly and accurately the great diversity of opinions expressed in our various humanities activities over the first two months of this year. I have expressed my own views of the issues we face in talks and discussions with a number of Sitka's civic organizations.

I believe we live in a cosmos that abhors monocultures as much as it abhors a vacuum. The problem with a vacuum, and leads Nature to destroy it, is that a vacuum is exactly the same everywhere. It cannot tolerate diversity. None of us wants to live in a vacuum; one cannot breathe in a vacuum, and a monoculture smothers us too. So diversity is essential to an enduring community; not only biodiversity, but idea diversity, language diversity, ritual diversity, faith diversity, opinion diversity, ethnic diversity... well, you get the idea here.

I believe that Sitka, despite its many unique characteristics, is a microcosm; perhaps more accurately, Sitka is like a hologram of the country as a whole. These days we all have to face many of the same issues regardless of where we live. My own shorthand account of the issues facing any community that seeks to become enduring is pretty simple. For those of you who may not have heard me speak of it before, it goes like this:

For me, sustainability is not about the environment. It is not about social justice. It is not about the economy. An enduring culture is about all those matters and more. Our most fundamental problem is not an economic problem; it is not a species die-out problem; it is not a racial problem. At least, not only. It is a spiritual problem. Not a religious problem but a spiritual problem, or a problem of worldview. As a culture we have drifted into a way of looking at the world that has become so self-centered it has crippled our capacity for respect, and let atrophy our capacity for seeing the implications of our actions for the future, the ramifications of our actions on the rest of the world. We think we can mine this without imperiling that. We think we can destroy this, without destroying something in or of ourselves. One result of that is that we have developed a global culture that is destroying the planet and in the process is killing us. Violence, not flu, has become the real global pandemic. Not just humans violating humans, but violence to our neighbor fish, our neighbor deer, our neighbor bird, as poet Richard Hugo would have put it. Along the way we have endangered our capacity for respect toward this world we say we cherish and that is our one ultimately nonrenewable resource... Denial of these issues, or refusal to face and deal with them, works about as well as denial of alcoholism or domestic abuse.

The popular image of sustainability as a three-legged stool makes it easy to pit the environment against social justice and the economy, or pit the economy against social justice and the environment in favor of profit, and leaves social justice to fight for equality against those other two powerful forces in contemporary culture. That is not an image for sustainability, but a blueprint for a society that cannot endure. It is an image that leaves out the worldview, the spirituality that engenders respect for all aspects of this world we live in. Without the worldview – including respect for ecology, commerce, and social justice – there is no sustainable society within reach. We have to care about it all.

Many Sitkans are already taking steps to ameliorate the issues that are clearly before us. The larger community's lending a hand to those groups and individuals is essential. One further step will be to continue and deepen further this conversation that began in last summer's Island Institute symposium and was encouraged by this project. Thanks to your participation in various aspects of these current "Up for Discussion" humanities activities, we have broadened that discussion and greatly increased the number of perspectives brought into play upon these issues. Without those additional perspectives the conversation would have been seriously incomplete.

We do not all agree, of course, and my perspective may be a surprise to some. But the point is not that one or another position or point of view prevail. The point is to allow as many perspectives to gain expression as possible.

What is remarkable and encouraging is this: Sitka is a community that has a great way of disagreeing with itself, and yet going on. From what you have told me, and one of the things I hope this report reveals, is that for most Sitkans the sense of community finally transcends the dissension, and holds sway. It's what compels you to assist even those with whom you disagree. To me, that is the very essence, the heart, soul, and intelligence of democracy, and one of the absolute essentials for creating an enduring community. Your experiences, and the diverse views of Sitka you have shared, give me powerful reasons to remain optimistic.

Rainier Maria Rilke, a great poet of the last century, has a few lines that speak to us today:

I can tell, by the ways the trees beat...
on my worried windowpanes
that a storm is coming,
and I hear the far-off fields say things
I can't bear without a friend,
I can't love without a sister.

(from "The Man Watching")

Our world, "the far-off fields," and some much closer, are telling us difficult things Rilke could not have foreseen, things we'd rather not hear, perhaps cannot bear to hear "without a friend," cannot learn to love "without a sister." Paying attention to what the world, or another Sitkan, says is one way to express our love for this world and for our community. Having "friends" and having "sisters" in the community makes the bad news bearable, lets the good news put us to dancing.

That's partly why I've always been grateful for this other, more recent poem, by William Stafford.

WHERE WE ARE

Fog in the morning here
will make some of the world far away
and the near only a hint. But rain
will feel its blind progress along the valley,
tapping to convert one boulder at a time
into a glistening fact. Daylight will love what came.
Whatever fits will be welcome, whatever
steps back in the fog will disappear
and hardly exist. You hear the river
saying a prayer for all that's gone.

Far over the valley there is an island
for everything left; and your own island
will drift there too, unless we hold on,
unless we tap like this: "Friend,
are you there? Will you touch when
you pass, like the rain?"

Notice here that Stafford is talking about a special, though very common kind of rain. Not a trash-mover and gully washer, but a softer rain that will "feel its blind progress along the valley,/ tapping

to convert one boulder at a time/ into a glistening fact.” This is no violent storm, confronting us with ruin, but the soaking rain we need after drought, a bringer and sustainer of life, the rain that heals.

Nevertheless we may still be lost: “Your own island will drift, unless we hold on.” Notice the shift in the pronouns here: “Your own island... we hold on.” One glistening fact of our time is that we all need each other now – both the friend and the stranger – perhaps more than ever before in the history of the world. We are all more vulnerable than we have ever been. The individual, the special interests within the community, cannot – will not – make it without the whole community.

The reality is, like it or not, uncomfortable as it may make us to be shoulder to shoulder with folks who hold different views or maintain different customs, we all need each other now, perhaps more than ever before in our human history. A question we might all ask ourselves about every aspect of Sitka’s community life is, “Friend, are you there? Will you touch when you pass, like the rain?” How we answer will determine whether we have a community with a future. Then, to help us create that future, each of us will ask herself or himself, “Can I learn to say, ‘Friend, I am here?’”

When we can say that, “Friend, I am here...” to the whole community (think friends, think sisters, think others working for community in retail, the fine arts, our commerce and education, our workforces, our governance at every level, the humanities, our healing and spiritual arts, think gay, think lesbian, think transgendered, think children with special needs, think the victims of violence and the perpetrators of violence, the lonely... and then think herring, think Sitka spruce, think streams and blue lakes and oceans, think mountains, think air...) – when we can think of our community as at least that inclusive, and when we can say, “Friend, I am here,” to all that, then, together, we can believe in the possibility of an enduring community.