

Greenland

Chapter 6: The Necessity of Breaking Taboos

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Growing up as a queer Inuk girl, I have faced different problems on many fronts, although many Inuk children go through hard stuff. At the start of my childhood, I was amazed by the Inuit culture: rum dancing, singing, the clothes, the food, the language. As a small Inuk child, you could find me dancing to the drum, making small caves in the huge piles of snow, going hunting and fishing, and having my face completely dirty from eating Greenlandic food with my hands. But as I grew older, I had friends with problems I didn't really understand at first. Three of the main problems they had were: alcoholic parents, abuse, and suicide.

Here in Greenland there really isn't much to do for young people and us kids. Since I reached adolescence, my friends and I would walk around the city to pass the time. I remember one night after walking around the whole city with my friends, it started to get late and we decided that it was time to go home. One of my friends just stood there and didn't move. He asked us if he could sleep at someone's home. "Why?" we asked him. He then explained that his dad was an alcoholic and was probably already very drunk by now. He was scared to go home because he knew his dad would be

angry with him and beat him up. Unfortunately, we were just small kids who didn't know better. It was getting too late to ask our parents if he could stay at our houses so our answer to him was just: "Sorry. It's too late." That boy ended up walking around the city until his dad went to work the next morning. This was his night almost every weekend.

I also know a girl--a popular girl, who had a boyfriend, and just seemed like a genuinely happy person. I knew that she was struggling at home and with school. She barely speaks any Danish, rather only Greenlandic, and it's very hard to receive an adequate education in Greenland if you're not fluent in Danish. A few months before our graduation, we stopped seeing her at school. One day I went to school thinking it was a completely normal day, until my teacher came in and told us that the girl was laying in the hospital after swallowing almost a whole bottle of pills. They had saved her from almost dying. When she came back to school, you could see from the look in her eyes that she was scared.

Another time I had a best friend. We would spend almost every day together and always have sleepovers. Early in our friendship, we became close and she told me some of her biggest secrets. Her dad was an alcoholic and had touched her when she was a small girl. She was suicidal and would cut herself. I felt so sorry for her and did everything to help her and be there for her. Several times, I would be hanging out with some friends and she would

call me asking if she could spend the night at my house because her dad was drinking. I gladly said yes because I didn't want her to feel bad. One time she worried me a lot after she told me that a few weeks earlier she had planned the day she would kill herself, which explained why we had hung out more than usual. Thankfully, she decided not to do it.

There is also a girl I once knew, who was such a sweet girl. She was adopted and had two older sisters who were also adopted. She struggled a lot because of dyslexia but received a lot of help from the school. She might be one of the strongest girls I ever knew because a few years before high school graduation, her sister ended up committing suicide. Later, the same happened with her other sister. While going through grief for her sisters, her mother became sick with cancer and died a year later. Even though this girl went through so much, she stayed strong and finished school with amazing results.

Even I, as a 17-year-old girl, have experienced being mentally abused, sexually abused and having suicidal thoughts. Being a part of the LGBTQ+ community can also be extremely difficult here in Greenland. Before colonization, being LGBTQ+ was barely a problem. A part of our Indigenous culture would be, for example, men dressing up as women. Since being colonized by Denmark, the discrimination against the queer community is more visible. There are so many

youth who identify with at least one of the many sexual identities, but it has become such a taboo to speak out about it that many are too afraid or too embarrassed to come out. They feel like an outsider; they feel like who they are is wrong. In many cases, these feelings can often end with suicide.

There are so many more stories to tell. This is the reality of being an Indigenous youth in Greenland. Living as a young Inuk in the harsh climate of the Arctic, life is hard. With Greenland being one of the countries with the highest rates of suicide, it is guaranteed that every Greenlandic person you meet will know someone who has committed suicide. However, what is the real problem that is causing all of this? Taboo? Education? Or maybe, normalization?

Here in Greenland, because of colonization, we had to adapt to “the modern world” faster than possible. As a result, many people ended up with problems like alcoholism, addiction, and low self-worth. Greenland officially stopped being a colony in 1953, so both my parents’ generation and my generation have grown up surrounded by these broken people, making life as a young Inuk very hard. This is especially true because in most families, talking about these feelings is taboo. These feelings have almost become a part of our culture.

When people finally get up on their feet and say, “You know what? I have this very bad feeling and I think I should get help,” the Inuk community

usually answers: “I used to have this feeling too and I’m fine now. Just wait and it will be over soon.” This is instead of offering them help. This becomes a cycle for every generation who wants and needs help. What many people and, yes, even the politicians and municipality, forget, is the human right to attain the highest attainable standard of health, both physically and mentally.

Another important factor in this cycle is the lack of education. Just above 50% of the young people who finish primary school in Greenland have high enough grades to enter high school. Out of those young people who do get into high school, around 50% drop out before graduating. Only 1/3 of the Greenlandic population has an education higher than primary school¹ and, without a good education, obtaining employment can be rather difficult. How is the other 2/3 of the population supposed to earn money for their families? What do they do to help their families? What we know of—and what we have almost come to expect—is that they will turn to bad lifestyles in order to live a life under a roof with four walls.

This is why I think it is so important that we start to help, strengthen and educate us Indigenous youth: to help break this cycle that has been going on since colonization. But what can we do? What

¹ Naduk Kleemann, ed., “Greenland in Figures 2018,” 15th ed. (Statistics Greenland, May 2018), <http://www.stat.gl/publ/kl/GF/2018/pdf/Greenland%20in%20Figures%202018.pdf>.

can we do to strengthen our self-worth? What can we do to help and guide our young people to a higher education? What can we do to make the politicians and municipality listen to us? What can we do to make sure that they respect our rights?

In my opinion, we have to first deal with taboo and normalization. When I say “we,” I mean you, me, fellow Indigenous Peoples, politicians, everyone. But changing the culture and our way of being is easier said than done. So to break this cycle, we need to accept these feelings and the problems that we have. We need to accept and acknowledge that we have this cycle. I encourage you to speak up.

It is not enough to simply talk about this destructive cycle and accept it; rather, we need to realize that these problems that we as Indigenous youth have are real and require action. It’s not enough to say, “I’ve been there, you will get over it.” You need to help us. You need to help us break this cycle, because, if you don’t, you might end up seeing your grandchildren live the exact same way. We beg you to stop blaming us for being the way we are. Take action.

One of the things we, as Indigenous Inuit Peoples, have always been very good at is being together as a community, accepting and being there for each other no matter what. We need to become better and learn to be like this again in order for us to break this cycle.

We do not even need to take huge action to help make a change. An example is: asking someone about their day, how they are feeling, and if they are going through something difficult lately. If they are, talk to them. If it is something that concerns you, reach out to someone more qualified to help them or encourage them to reach out themselves. Show someone that they can trust you and that you are there for them. If you know someone with some kind of addiction, you could find out the best way to approach this person. Offer them help. By doing this, you might inspire others and encourage them to do the same.

Is someone you know not doing very well at school? Offer to help them a bit. With LGBTQ+ youth in particular, the best thing you can do is show them that you respect them. That for you, they are just ordinary people and that it is okay for them to be who they are. But also, if you are the one walking around with the stigma of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people on your shoulders, try taking small baby steps out of this circle called the comfort zone and speak up. Reach out to a person you trust and tell them what you're carrying around, because they might want to help you.

Like Neil Armstrong once said: "One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." In this case, it is a small step for you, and one giant leap for our country and our future.

By doing these small things in our lives, other people will follow.

By doing these small things in our lives, we can break these taboos.

By doing these small things in our lives, you might change a person's whole life.

By doing these small things in our lives, we can slowly but surely break a cycle that has been going on for centuries.

Other important issues that the Indigenous youth in Greenland face are conflicts around nationality and identity, language and racism. Due to intentional misleading and lack of education after the colonial period, there has almost always been a battle between Denmark and Greenland. Because of this, during the first years of elementary school, kids already start to put other kids into discriminatory categories. "You're Danish, you're white, you're blond, you speak Danish," etc. Already that early, you can feel the separation between kids simply because of their looks and their spoken language. This becomes rather difficult for the youth who try so hard not to be Danish that they end up barely knowing any of the Danish language, which can cause a major barrier when one is trying to enter high school.

For the youth who are lighter-skinned and grew up with Danish in their families or who are half-Danes and half-Greenlanders, they usually all end up in some kind of identity crisis from childhood that they still live with as an adult. They

question themselves: “Am I good enough? Am I Greenlandic enough? Who am I? WHAT am I? Am I worthy enough to call myself Greenlandic?” I even went through this once. It started when I was just 10 years old in elementary school. I was sitting with my friends who spoke more Danish than Greenlandic and, since I have green eyes and light brown hair, I was immediately put into the category of a Danish girl. The other kids would shout, “Shut up you stupid Danes. Speak Greenlandic. We are in Greenland.”

I started to realize that they didn't see me as equally Greenlandic as them. I would cry and feel shame that I did not have brown eyes and black hair. I wished and begged for brown eyes and black hair. For many years I struggled because I knew inside myself that I am Greenlandic; others just didn't see me as Greenlandic. I have seen many others go through this, and they often end up moving to Denmark. But then when you go to Denmark, what happens? The exact same happens as when you were in Greenland, but in the opposite way. You will be put in the category of a “drunk Greenlander” and will be called names. You will struggle with trying to be accepted since you couldn't be accepted in Greenland. You will be degraded as a person, degraded inside your soul because you start to wonder, “Where am I supposed to be? I don't fit in with anyone. I won't be accepted by anyone.” You end up with a long, tiring battle inside you.

Despite all of the sad stories and issues we have as Indigenous young people, we try every day to do everything we can to have a good life, to be accepted for who we are, and to live with the rights we are supposed to have. I know that we are very strong and that we have something unique that the rest of the world can learn from.

In our history, we have always been degraded, but we are incredibly strong young people. We are people who are extremely proud of our country, of who we are, and of our culture. We want to show that to the world. Every day, I see more and more young Indigenous people being proud of who they are and trying to learn parts of our culture that have been lost. I think this is beautiful because wanting to take back our culture and feeling pride in our culture is starting to bring us closer as a community and as Indigenous young people.

Although Indigenous youth are becoming more and more diverse in terms of background, identity and sexuality, we are getting a lot better at holding on together, respecting each other and coming together as a community. When you open up your eyes to the world, especially if you use social media as much as us young people, you start to see that in both Europe and the United States, racism and sexism grows more and more every day, whereas here we are slowly but surely getting better at accepting each other.

I think this is something very important that the world can learn from us.

When I imagine a better future for Indigenous youth, I imagine a country where we are more open and helping. A country with everyone helping anyone who feels like they need it. A country where you can be whoever you are no matter your skin tone, eye color, hair color, ethnicity, or sexuality. A country that focuses on the mental health of the young people and tries to adapt the education system to our needs and ways of learning.

I therefore encourage everyone, all you Indigenous young people like me, to do whatever you can in life, big or small, to help create a country where we are proud of our people, proud of what we can do, and proud of our community.