

A Conversation with Irene Sullivan: *Understanding of the Heart*

by Richard Whittaker, May 18, 2008



It began with an email I received. Someone had discovered the magazine and had been touched, Irene Sullivan. A note like that is always a lift, but something compelled me to ask a question or two in response. It opened an exchange. After looking at Sullivan's ice paintings, I learned that Sullivan had lived in the remote regions of Alaska providing health care as a nurse practitioner to the Inupiat speaking peoples there. This alone was enough to stimulate my interest, but later on, I learned several other things. Sullivan was an avid photographer. Her experiences with indigenous people had led her to a deep interest in the role of women in shamanic practices among arctic peoples. Eventually she found herself doing independent research as a Fulbright scholar in Denmark at

the Institute of Eskomoligie. But before that, Sullivan had left her career as a nurse practitioner and had become an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church. Her ministry was in the sub-arctic region of northern Manitoba where she served three villages of the Cree people. She had gone there newly married to a Roman Catholic priest who had given up his orders and had been received as a priest in the Episcopal Church. Woven into the fabric of all this, besides her nursing credentials, Sullivan earned two Masters degrees and even did some work toward an MFA. Her education thus spans medicine, theology, cultural anthropology and art. Besides having done some university teaching, she is the coauthor, with Sam Gill, of the Dictionary of Native American Mythology.

But even before I learned the amazing reach of Sullivan's experience, I knew she was someone I wanted to talk with. And, as luck would have it, she and her husband, Will Reller, would be in Stinson Beach for a holiday in October, only an hour drive from Oakland. We met at a little motel there to talk...

Richard Whittaker: For the sake of context tell me again. You spent time in Alaska?

Irene Sullivan: I spent five years in Alaska in the late seventies and early eighties. I had an apartment in Fairbanks that I went to once every six to eight months, but primarily I traveled in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

RW: Now, specifically, you were providing medical services.

IS: Health care. Yes. I was a nurse practitioner and worked with the Yupik speaking people who are related to the Inupiat, who people know as "Eskimos." But they have a separate dialect and they are in the southern part of Alaska.

RW: You were out there for five years, and the only way to get there was by boat or plane or dog sled, I suppose.

IS: Small plane from Bethel. You fly Fairbanks to Anchorage. Anchorage to Bethel. Then once you're in Bethel, depending on what part of the Bering Sea coast you want to go to, you take small bush planes. Once you're in the villages, then travel is by dogsled, snowmobile or again, small planes.

RW: So you must have become somewhat accustomed how to live in that climate, in the snow.

IS: I did. My first year was very difficult. James and Celestine Gump, who I told you about, a wonderful Yupik couple, really took care of me. My first year up there I almost lost my feet from severe frostbite. They taught me that you don't wear leather boots. One of the women made me sealskin mukluks to wear. You get wet and you're going to freeze. Later, I would go to summer fish camp with them. I learned how to gut salmon, how to dry salmon. James taught me things they didn't expect a white person to learn, but I was interested. I really wanted to be with people and I came to know them and what they were about. I'm coming to realize, nearly thirty years later, what an incredibly special time that was in my life.

RW: You spent time in the villages year round, in close contact, even intimate contact with them because of your role as a nurse practitioner.

IS: Yes. My very first experience out there was I was in the health station with one of the village health aides and a call came in. A young woman who had given birth maybe two days before was hemorrhaging severely. So I was suddenly faced with managing to get the plane in, having concerns about the weather, and airlifting her to Bethel to stop the hemorrhaging. The other thing that happened was a man was harnessing his sled dogs. One of the dogs took off and yanked his thumb out of the socket. This required getting him into Anchorage. You're trying to get that set up and you're telling people, "Find the thumb!" Pack it in ice! [laughs] Those were not the type of things that, in an inner city E.R., you'd learn to do. But you do it! And his dogs were okay and his thumb was okay. So life goes on, but that's the type of situation I was in. You have to think quickly on your feet. And I was much younger then.

RW: We were talking earlier about the indigenous people there and you told me that they were very-how did you put it?

IS: Very gentle and reflective. Quiet. Extremely quiet. Which was kind of hard for a gregarious westerner.

RW: How was that for you?

IS: There was a lot of sitting and waiting for the next word to be said, or sentence to be spoken. I listened a lot, when I was in Fairbanks, to the Jesuit missionaries who had been involved in the region for decades. Since the early 1900s and, some of these men, I really, really respected the work they were doing. I listened a lot to them in terms of just sitting in a kind of silence and being aware.

RW: The Jesuits. You mentioned earlier that you met this Jesuit, a radical Jesuit, you say..

IS: Ted Ross. I don't know if he'd call himself radical these days. That was thirty years ago. But yes, Ted was a thinking, reflective Jesuit. He was a scholar. He had come up to Alaska to do an intensive conference for the Jesuits up there, keep them up to date. They're wonderful educators and a very reflective bunch. I had a number of friends in the Jesuit Order who I worked side by side with in some situations. Well, I said, "I want to come to this conference."

RW: So something happened in this conference?

IS: Ted presented a picture of such hope. At that point in the history of the Roman Catholic Church, things were really happening. They took Vatican II very seriously. I took Vatican II very seriously about issues of social justice and being present to people. Ted really believed in that also, and he probably still does. It was a much more open church then, nothing like it is now, and that was reflected in the work that was being done. Ted was convinced that women were going to be ordained, and that clergy should be married. [laughs]



RW: So you were so moved by all this that you applied to the Jesuit School of Theology?

IS: I was invited to do that. Ted invited me.

RW: So did that mean anything about your feelings about being a nurse practitioner?

IS: You know, my history with nursing has always been a love-hate relationship. I was the last of the breed of women where you have two choices in life: you can be a teacher or a nurse. I went into nursing initially to get out of a very unhappy family-of-origin situation. It was what you did in those days, and the tide has changed.

RW: Okay. So here you are in Alaska. Often you're working closely with the Jesuits. There's hope that the Roman Catholic Church is adjusting to contemporary realities. So, you apply for admission and are accepted..

IS: And get a scholarship—because I had no money.

RW: You leave Alaska and show up in Chicago to begin studies.

IS: Where I'm informed that Rome has summoned the head of the Jesuit School of Theology to Rome to be disciplined over what was going on there. They were closing the school. They thought it was too liberal. They were inviting too many women, and I was given a choice. I could complete the first year with them and transfer to their school in Boston at Weston or out here to Berkeley, which I almost did after the first year.

RW: So you did complete that first year?

IS: I did the first year at Chicago, which is where I met my husband. That's another story because he was a high profile Roman Catholic priest.

RW: That must be an interesting story.

IS: Oh, yes. Thornbirds has nothing on us! Anyway, I completed my Master's of Divinity Degree at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, which is the degree for ordination.

During those years, I also looked at what was happening in the tone of the Catholic Church and realized I couldn't continue. I left and was received into the Episcopal Church. And Will, by that time, had left the Roman Catholic Church so we could marry. Essentially, he transferred his orders out of the Roman Catholic Church into the Episcopal Church where he was fully received as a priest.

RW: Amazing. So what happened then?

IS: We were invited by the Anglican Bishop of Manitoba in Canada to come up there. So, we went up there where I was ordained, a newly ordained priest. Will already had a lot of experience as a priest. We took care of three Cree villages in northern Manitoba. That would have been in 1984 to late 1986. We were in Grand Rapids, Manitoba which is above the 53rd parallel. It's considered sub-Arctic. I also worked part-time as a nurse practitioner, because there was limited health care up there. I was a nurse-practitioner priest.

RW: There is something kind of wonderful about that.

IS: It was incredible! I still believe that it's really what healing is about. And all my work with shamanism dovetailed with that. But there's no room for that in the current systems we have.

RW: But then something took you away from your ministry and Manitoba, right?

IS: Yes. I have to backtrack. When I was studying in Chicago, I was invited to a conference in Boulder by Sam Gill, the head of the religious studies department at the University of Colorado. Sam was trying to legitimize the study of Native American traditions within traditional religious studies departments. Not an easy task!

He really believed that he could start a Ph. D. program in religious studies at CU Boulder. He had come out of the University of Chicago and had done wonderful work in the Southwest with the Hopi and the Navajo. So we met at this conference. He was fascinated by the work that I was doing and I was equally impressed that there was a religious studies department that considered indigenous people's traditions legitimate. Many of these religious studies people are people of the book, for the most part. They have a written text. Whether it's the Koran or scriptures of various traditions, it doesn't matter. But with all these indigenous cultures, that's not the case at all. They're primarily oral traditions.

So I had told him, half jokingly, if you ever get a Ph. D. program started here, let me know. So time went on and one day, I got a phone call. He'd tracked me down in Northern Manitoba! He told me the Ph. D. program was coming and said, "I've got a master's program and I'd love to have you come down. You could be my Teaching Assistant." Well, it was too tempting. I told my husband I wanted to do it. And we ended up leaving Manitoba and came to Boulder.

RW: It's interesting that your husband was up for it. He must have found the prospect interesting, too.

IS: Yes. He's wonderful. He's been my support. I'm the one who goes off on all these great adventures and he's there. He says, go for it! It's really very special.

So in January of 1987 I went to Boulder, to the University of Colorado, and did work there with Sam Gill in the Department of Religious Studies. My thesis was on Cree storytellers.

RW: This was another Master's program?

IS: Yes. The second, this one with a specialty in the Arctic. My thesis was actually on a Swampy Cree story called Wesacachek Preaches to the Wolves but the area of concentration for me, rather than the plains nations or the tribes of the southwest, was the Arctic because this also was indigenous. Anyway, it was fascinating. I was pretty much on my own and Sam was a wonderful dissertation director. He was very encouraging and just told me to go for it.

RW: And you'd already become interested in questions of shamanism. Did you read the Casteñeda books?

IS: I did. While I was working in nursing in Buffalo, I wanted to get a degree in Art History. So I was taking courses and had a wonderful Art History teacher who had us read them just to get us to thinking that perhaps there's a different way of looking at things.

RW: Your art history teacher had you read Casteñeda?

IS: Yes. And this was in the mid-seventies. I'll never forget her. She had a wonderful way of teaching. She was a real dynamo in the classroom and you never forget

those folks because they're so rare. And later, when I taught, I tried to carry that through and it worked. I had a great time teaching.

RW: Where were you teaching?

IS: In 2000 I was adjunct faculty at Colorado State University in their department of Ethnic Studies. I also taught a couple of courses at CU Boulder in their summer program.

RW: Was this Anthropology?

IS: I did both Anthropology and Religious Studies because I had strong connections with the department of Anthropology. I considered, for a serious period of time, doing a Ph. D. in Anthropology. But I just couldn't.

RW: What stopped you?

IS: I've always just seemed to miss the boat by a few years. If I was going to land anywhere it was going to be as a cultural anthropologist and it just didn't feel right.

Anthropology was still very categorical, comparative. I didn't want to do that kind of work.

RW: Technically, I have a minor in English Lit. We had to do critical papers and I just couldn't cope with these two different worlds, the world that might be opened up by the book itself and then this dry, abstract, sort of lifeless relationship with the material that was demanded. Was it something like that?

IS: Exactly. And I had to do it when I was studying medicine, too. It was killing me. And that is what happened to me again, very recently. I got into the MFA program at Art Institute of Boston. I did one semester and wrote these papers, read all this art-critical theory.

After I'd sent off my last major paper for the semester, I sat down at the dinner table and I thought I was having an MI, a heart attack. I had such acute pain I thought, this is it! I ended up having a very serious stomach disorder. I'm convinced it was my body's way of telling me, you've been trying to swallow this and you can't!

RW: Well, backing up again. At Boulder you didn't get the Ph. D., right?

IS: No. I finished the Masters in religious studies and graduated in August and left in September for Denmark for my Fulbright. So I was in Denmark for the academic year of '88 to '89 to study Arctic peoples at the Institute of Eskimologie in Denmark. Which was great!

But when I came back from Denmark. I still thought I might do a Ph. D. in Anthropology at CU Boulder. Then I decided I couldn't do that. For some reason my life was saying, no, you're being taken somewhere else and you have to listen. I went back to work as a nurse practitioner. I had to make a living. I'd started painting in Canada, but I just didn't have any confidence. But I kept painting. Basically watercolors. Then Sam Gill, who had been my buddy and mentor through all of this, said, "I have a great idea. Let's write a book together. I want to compile a

dictionary of Native North American mythology!" I just said, "Oh, my God. I don't think you do something like this until you're a professor emeritus" [laughs]. But we worked it out. He did the indexing and I found the photographs. We produced the Dictionary of Native North American Mythology, which won numerous awards and was picked up by Oxford University Press in a paperback edition.

RW: It must have been a tremendous amount of work and it sounds like a great achievement.

IS: It was, and it was wonderful. We had a grand time.

RW: So say something more about your research in Denmark.

IS: Well, above and beyond the wonderful resources at the Institute of Eskimologie, I had attended a conference in which a group of male anthropologists made a statement that if there were women shamans in Greenland—if they weren't very powerful. I had an interpreter at the conference because English wasn't always the primary language. She was hysterical. I asked what he said. She turned toward me and said, you're not going to like this.

My gut feeling was that this was just another example of the tremendous power in the feminine, being relegated to some inferior position. It didn't matter whether it was Roman Catholicism or the Anthropology circles. Here we go again!

So I started looking at the stories in Medlesser Om Gronland which is Denmark's equivalent to our Bureau of Indian Affairs Journals. Greenland was colonized by Denmark for decades and within those volumes were stories that had been collected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the first Danes to go there.

I was very lucky because I had a Danish colleague who could translate some of them that had never been translated into English before. They were all either in Danish or phonetic Greenlandic which has several dialects and some of them are now extinct. So it was quite an undertaking even to get pieces. But there were more and more stories of women. Keep in mind, now, that these had been filtered primarily through male ethnographers with all the cultural layers of that culture.

What I found in one of the photographic archives, and in Denmark, these archives are not centralized. Different groups have different little archives. Rasmussen's group has theirs. Some of his writings are held in what used to be the Danish castle, but they're squirreled away in what used to be the dungeon where the King held prisoners. One light bulb hanging above, and shoeboxes of materials. But what I found were glass plate negatives of women engaging in what is shamanistic activity. One of the negatives I found is from the Thule region, very far north, and traditionally when Greenlandic women—they wear their hair up—when they let it down, they are conjuring or engaging in shamanic activity. I found this wonderful photograph of this woman with her hair down, swinging, drumming—highly shamanic activity. Then there were several other photographs. I said, I know this is another historical cover up. I did a lot of work with that.

RW: Is any of that material, those glass plate negatives, captured in some way?

IS: I had them make copies for me. I spent two months living allowance to have them made. I really thought this was going to be my life's work in terms of an academic career.

RW: That work would be excavating information about women shamans?

IS: Women shamans in the Arctic. And teaching and writing.

RW: And in a note to me, you said that you had become discouraged because you had uncovered material that could have been the basis of important scholarly work. But you ran into some problems with some academic presses. What happened there?

IS: A couple of them really wanted it and would have gone with it, but they wanted too much control. The other big thing, even though I made it very clear in the preface was that I was not a linguist and this was not a linguistic analysis. But the University of Chicago was pretty intense about that. After the fact, I found out that it was someone who was actually very jealous of the material. It happens.

RW: So there was something you were unwilling to abandon. This was around integrity, not egotism. It was about the protection of something.

IS: It really was, and you're one of the few people who have picked up on that. My dissertation director at the time, and others in academia who had opened a lot of doors for me, were horrified. They all said, basically, you can't have it both ways. I said, then I don't want it!

Part of that was having lived in the Arctic, having sat under the midnight sun with Yupik women gutting fish, saying very little, but feeling that strong bond. Then going back into these stories, there was a feeling, there was an intuition that these are voices speaking across centuries and I wasn't going to put this material into an academic, western, English language format and have it treated in a way that I honestly didn't feel was respectful of the material. That's what it came down to.

I was told that I was shooting myself in the foot. I was never going to make it doing this. They were very clear. That was fine. But in the end, I couldn't do it and I wouldn't do it.

RW: Hopefully time will show that that was a good decision.

IS: I still think it was a good decision!

RW: Because the story isn't over yet.

IS: [laughs] That's right! Maybe that part is, but you're right.

RW: Well, I'm struck by your experience in the Cree villages where you were both priest and nurse practitioner. You attended to the health of the physical body and also to the health of the emotional, psychic and soul body. That, to me, seems absolutely an ideal, and that's the scope of practice as understood for healers in more traditional cultures, isn't it?

IS: Very much so. The Inuit shamans, the Arctic shamans, which is the group I'm most familiar with, they were story tellers, artists, healers. And the healers were, just by nature of what the healing entailed, the ritual leaders. They were the ones who flew to the moon to recover your soul, or flew to the sea to recover your soul. They

did battle with the malevolent spirits that might be bothering you. And in Greenland, particularly, they had a very interesting diagnostic system. It's a rich, rich culture. And many, many indigenous cultures have that. I mean, it's not just the Arctic. You see this in many places if you look.

RW: What led you to want to go and begin to research about shamanism and specifically about shamanism among women in the Arctic Peoples?

IS: Living there. Having had that experience of living in a land with people who still talked about spirits in seals, why the fish were coming or not coming, being stalked by a polar bear and still talked about, in very hushed tones, people who were involved in good medicine or bad medicine, even though the church was very much there, had taken away drumming and dance. But the women would tell me when I would go out to gather things on the tundra, eggs and birds, as conversation would go on I would hear things like, "this would be good for healing this and this would be good for healing that." I realized I was getting small little pieces of knowledge that once was embedded in an entire culture. So that, in part. And also because I believed at the time, even though I was trained in a very strict, technological, invasive western model of medicine—I did a lot of trauma ER type of work—I knew there was another way of being, and I was experiencing that. Perhaps I could find information about that in a study of shamanism. That was one of the things that really interested me.

RW: And I know that while you were in Alaska that you had a big old heavy Nikon.

IS: Very heavy. An F2. I wore it around my neck. I'd go out on the ice in the spring and loved to see if I could catch the walrus sunbathing. They'd always see me coming and disappear. But the ice became so fascinating, the formations of the ice, which is the reason I got into photographing.

Then, as I got more comfortable in the village... I did not want to be one of these people who was just taking photographs. That was a real bone of contention because they've suffered a lot of invasiveness over the decades. For the first couple of years, I just didn't. Then I always asked. After awhile it became okay. Oh, she's just going out with her camera. It was developing a trust. Then, when I did make prints, I'd make sure people would get them. Like James and Celestine never had a picture of themselves together. So I blew one up and sent it to them. They were just thrilled!

RW: It sounds like you really had a love affair with photography.

IS: I had always loved black and white photographs. Growing up, and while in university, black and white photographs, particularly war photography, not of the bombings but of people's faces and their lives, those always affected me very deeply. So photography had always been a real love. In Alaska, it's so stark and powerful in its starkness that, if you had any leanings in that way, you would get a camera and enter into this space of photography. There was a wonderful photographer at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks who taught black and white photography, so I took the course. I wanted to get a handle on how do I keep my film warm, what kind of settings to use and so on because of the snow, and it was so cold. He had lived in Alaska for years so he knew all that. And he made arrangements for me to use his

friend's darkroom whenever I'd come in from the villages. So I'd be there at one in the morning working away.

RW: Can you say more about your relationship with photography in Alaska?

IS: It was, gosh... [pause] It's almost hard to describe. I'd go out on the tundra with my camera and whatever presented itself, whatever the invitation was, if you're listening—John Daido Loori, the head of the Zen Order of Mountains and Rivers is a photographer. He studied years ago with Minor White and he talks about the sitting and the waiting and just seeing what evolves. I didn't learn about Minor White or John until years after I'd come out of Alaska, but when I read it, I thought, that's very similar to what would happen.

And it was a love affair. I loved the land. I loved the people. I loved the silence. I always thought, I wonder if you can put this on film? Because when you love something that much, I think it's very natural to want to share that. Of course, you can't exactly do that, but maybe you can come close to it. So that was my relationship with photography.

RW: I understand what you're saying. Going back to your respect for the indigenous people you lived with and your refusal to accept the conditions academic presses demanded in order to publish your research. There's something important in what you're protecting. Can you say anything about this? What is it that you've sensed and experienced that you would like to preserve or make available to others in the right form.

IS: [silence] You know, it has to do with trust and vulnerability. These stories were collected. People may or may not have been paid for them. There's a whole controversy in the anthropological culture about that form of invasiveness, that form of white anthropologists coming in and collecting stories. And stories in these cultures and in many indigenous cultures are considered sacred gifts and they are to be used and told responsibly. You know, when I, a few years ago, I did a whole series of paintings about Yupik masks. One of the reasons I went to Berlin when I was in Europe was the Dalham Museum in Berlin actually held a Yupik mask collection from the very village I was in, collected in the 1800s by this German gentleman.

It took me forever to get permission to get in there, but they were, finally, very gracious. I had an interpreter with me all the time. I got into the vaults. So I had access to this mask collection.

I went to do portraits of these masks to honor the masks through this western tradition of how we honor people by painting portraits of them. So I did a whole series of portraits of the masks. But I couldn't show them until I had wrestled with the question of being invasive. I went back into my notes and James Gump, who you have the photo of; we were talking about something along the lines of people who come into the village and just take what they need and then leave. We were talking about sharing knowledge. He said in Yupik cosmology and thinking there is a strong belief that if you don't share your knowledge and what you know, your brain will rot. [laughs] Somehow that, at least, gave me permission to paint those portraits of those masks.

But it has to do with trust and context, and respect.

RW: Okay. But is there anything else beyond that? Are there aspects of this material itself? Is there something it has to tell us or that we could learn from in any way?

IS: I believe there is and I've only come to this recently. I was in a conversation in my Jungian work and it was pointed out to me that the great heroic myth for the male psyche is the hero's journey and the hero's return, ever since the Greek times. I go out and I find all these various creatures and places and I CONQUER THEM. I come back and I'm a hero! This is the only myth that has been available for women. And almost instantly, I said, "That's right! But I know where the female version is." It's in these stories.

What happens when a woman is called to be a shaman, first of all she has her familial group who do not encourage this. She has too many responsibilities. But she is called. And in Greenlandic lore, she is always called out of the village into the tundra alone. That's where she meets her helping spirit.

Teemiaratsiaq, who's the most famous of this group, a storyteller, the first time she met her helping spirit it said to her "I will teach you so that you will cease to be powerless."

So what happens is that these women go out and they usually encounter one of two things. They are met by a giant bear who eats them alive and then regurgitates their parts all over the tundra. Then they have to learn how to, literally, re-member themselves. And in that re-membling, they learn who they are and what they are about. They then return to their villages and are then healers. Or else, they go out to the edge of the sea where they encounter giant walruses who pick them up and throw them back and forth like a ball between them. Then they have to find their way back after that.

But what struck me was these women go out alone with no fanfare. There is no hero's return. They have these adventures by themselves. They are destroyed in some way, either eaten alive or bounced back and forth—and there are other things that happen to them. They meet all kinds of things. But they return and what they bring into the community is a sense of healing and awareness, which allows them then to travel to retrieve souls, which is the big ailment in arctic cultures, the loss of souls. What these women go through and how they are treated, I think, speaks volumes.

In my Jungian work, which I've been doing for a very long time, first in Chicago and now in Denver, it speaks about that tremendous integration, which we don't have in this culture. We're afraid to be alone. We're afraid to go out and re-member ourselves after we've been swallowed and regurgitated.

So that is one of the jewels that I think is held in these stories.

RW: That's powerful. [a pause] You spent time during your years in the Arctic in both Alaska and with the Canadian tribes, you spent time with the women, sitting there gutting fish and doing other kinds of work. And fragments of things began to be shared with you and you must have been a person who could hear these things. And so probably you were given more things because you felt something and had some respect for these things, right? [nods] So can you say anything more about these moments?

IS: There is a concept in Buddhism. They talk about one taste. That in your greatest pain is your greatest joy and in your greatest joy is your greatest pain. It's one taste. It cannot be separated out. You can't have one or the other. And sometimes I thought, this is one taste, this is a privilege. I entered a portal of another way of life.

I wasn't going native. I wasn't trying to be someone I'm not. But I entered this: right here and right now, I'm sitting here and cutting fish with a group of

Yupik women. Very little is being said in either language. There's a mound of fish in front of you and I'm the real novice at it [laughs]. They're constantly watching what I'm doing so I don't destroy too much. And things are being said and shared in a way... I realized, I often thought, this is the greatest gift in the world. If I die tomorrow, I will have experienced this richness, and it was very hard for me to come back, even though I had to.

Why can't we put down our differences and sit down together? It's something that affects you so deeply. You're never the same afterwards.

RW: Okay. Now here's another big question. Something moved you to become a nurse practitioner. You said it was one of the only options you had to get out into the world. But even though it solved a problem, I'm guessing there was something more to it. Then there was also the photography. Then you found yourself spending time with Jesuits and then you became a priest. Maybe you're still a priest?

IS: No. I surrendered my orders. I still have a number of people who consider me their priest and who will call me to bury or baptize, which I do.

RW: And you've been in academia. Now you're a painter. So is there something that connects all this together in some way?

IS: You know, as I'm getting older and I'm doing deeper work, there is a thread. There is definitely a thread. When you weave, there is the warp and the weft, but it's one piece. I think, as I continue on this journey, the fact that the priesthood, nursing, medicine, the arts, photography, painting, writing (I write a lot) it's all one thread. It's all part of the practice.

RW: Sometimes I try to talk about what interests me about art and I point out that the phrase "art, philosophy and religion" used to roll off the tongue with the greatest of ease. These all seemed connected in some essential way. But maybe that's now language from the past. A big shift has taken place.

IS: And I came out of that tradition. I had a unique position in that, because in order to study theology, you have to study philosophy. Philosophy is the handmaiden of theology. So I had a vast philosophical background and I happened to come of age when feminism and the feminist critique was developing. I was confronted many times and told, "your politics aren't clean enough." That's less so now, because the tide is switching, but I'd think, my politics aren't clean enough. My God, what do you mean? I'm out there. I'm doing it.

RW: What do you think they meant?

IS: Because I would entertain a conversation with what was considered and labeled patriarchal structure. I mean I was told things like, well, we don't read Heidegger here. We don't do this. We don't do that. So I would read this and also that.

What I find interesting is that what I was entertaining and arguing twenty years ago in graduate school, they just now, in these MFA programs, are considering new.

RW: What is it that stops us from being able to take the good in the new and not throw the good along with the bad in what's been reconceived? Many things have been shown to be relative, or slanted by issues of power. Does that really mean, for instance, that there is no such thing as any unifying realities that reach across cultural landscapes? I'm talking this way, because I feel that you're someone who has struggle with such things.

IS: I still struggle with them. I struggle with them all of the time. People cannot tolerate incongruity or confusion. They want the horizon line clear. They want to be able to see it, to control it, and to understand it. They don't want a horizon line filled with questions. I was watching the horizon this morning walking on the beach. The fog moved in and out and in and out. There was no real horizon line. A mystery. We have to know. Can't live with a question.

RW: Well put. I wonder what are your thoughts about the situation of art today. I'm going to leave this pretty wide open. Big question. I could narrow it down, but I'd like to see what happens with that.

IS: What comes to mind, and these are questions that I hold ever since they were posed by Enrique Martinez Celaya, in this intensive course I took at Anderson Ranch. He asked this group of us there, ten painters, after telling his story of Velasquez, which I'm sure you've heard...

RW: I don't remember that.

IS: Velasquez had painted something that had upset someone in the Papacy, and the Inquisition was going on, he was summoned before the inquisitors about this particular painting. They said to him, would you like to bring some witnesses to speak on your behalf? (I'm paraphrasing.) He stood there and said no, my paintings are all the witness I need. Enrique went around the room and said how many of you could say that? [laughs] Of course, people were falling off their chairs. Another question he asked was, "Would your painting make someone less lonely on their deathbed?"

Much of what he said has stayed with me, but that particularly. So what is the nature of art nowadays? There is certainly a lot out there that I would not want hanging in my room near my deathbed. There's a lot of exploration going on for the sake of exploration. I don't think that's good or bad. It's just what it is.

I don't know what to think. I feel overwhelmed by it. I often feel dismissed by it. I think it's the greatest challenge of my life, making a commitment to being an artist and trying to deal with the artworld. It's far more difficult than cracking someone's chest in a trauma room, someone who has been in an accident and you have to do that to stop the bleeding.

I find the artworld incredibly mercurial. You never know where you stand. It's being dictated to by a consciousness in this culture that is very superficial.

RW: Yes. My question is, is there something for all those people who have been touched and moved by what we call art, and feel moved to search for a promise that might really be there, but which can not be found and will not be found by turning toward the artworld?

IS: Oh boy. I don't know because every now and then, within the artworld, as you've defined it, you do encounter it. I have a friend who curates a very wealthy individual's collection and she was talking about some of what goes on. She and I both said, so Okay, you have to separate this out. You invest in a piece, not because it moves you, not because it speaks to your soul, not because you want to live with it, but because of a certain signature. Then it goes into someone's vault or curatorial thing. I mean, I almost find that blasphemous to do that to a piece of art. We both felt that way, and she's the curator. It's an investment. That's an aspect of it I don't know what to do with.

RW: I think a lot of people don't know what to do with it. One way to look at it is to say that there's some realm that art sometimes touches and comes from and goes to.

IS: It does.

RW: And there's another realm in which money is the thing. Nothing new about this observation, but it's very perplexing as to how those two relate. Have you thought about it in that way at all?

IS: I've never thought of them relating, or if they do, because there's such a disjuncture there.

RW: Right.

IS: You often wonder and, of course, you have to be careful because you start using language that makes people start crawling up the wall, you often wonder if there isn't a loss of soul. There's such a disjuncture between this life and soul, that people don't know how to stand in front of a piece of art and to understand what it's gifting you with.

RW: I ponder what it means for our culture that there are probably quite a few painters here in Stinson Beach. If I were in Half Moon Bay, I could say the same thing. Maybe I could say this in any town in the country, there are a good many painters here. If not painters, then some potters or woodworkers or carvers or quilters or some other kind of art thing. So, in other words, there are probably hundreds of thousands of people who are doing something we commonly call art. And a lot of them would say, "I'm an artist." Then we have something called the artworld. But these people doing these art things are not part of it. Maybe they don't know it, but they're not. See what I'm looking at?

IS: I think it's a question of who defines you. Are you defined by the exterior culture? And we also get into the financial thing here. People make tremendous sacrifices. I have. Believe me, I'm living off what is supposed to be my retirement to paint full time, to try to get my work out there. Then you realize, this is a monastic discipline. I'm in the studio every day confronting my demons. And I think any artist knows what I'm talking about. We're creative beings. But then there's another place you go. It's like marriage. Oh, I've been dating this person for awhile, but now I'm going to make a commitment. And it is in the face of everything. This is what I do because I can do no other. That's the vocatio of it.

So you make this commitment and you show up in your studio whether you feel like it or not. It has nothing to do with whether you feel like it or not. And you do the work. That's hard. It's lonely and it's hard. And you have no one to talk to. You do find yourself asking, who am I painting this for? So it really does become a call.

People freak out over that word, too. They think it's a spook word. I don't know too many artists who can or are making the tremendous sacrifices to follow what is important to you, your integrity, your heart, what you feel you're meant to do. I mean, works & conversations is one of the most incredible things I've run across. I'm so glad I did, because it's genuine. I can sit down and read it and reread it. Artforum comes and I go okay I'm going to look at it because it's important to know what's going on out there. That's a different thing.

RW: Thank you. Starting the magazine was almost a natural reaction against what seemed to be missing in the artworld. People need some kind of food. They may be finding their way back a little now. I'm not sure.

IS: I agree with you. Because people don't even know they're looking for this until you offer it to them. They say, "Wow!" It's like they've been dulled down. They don't even know that they're hungry if they've been so satiated with fluff, or there's no wide range, even of taste. Then sometimes you feel like am I the only person on this planet for whom this is an issue? That's one of the things that your magazine does. You see that, no, you're not the only person on the planet for whom this is an issue.

RW: You're not. There are a lot of people. Maybe they may have some trouble finding each other.

It's a frightening thing that we now have a culture that makes it possible for us to entertain ourselves to death. I mean, if I'm uncomfortable, there's always television or radio or the Internet, videos.

IS: God forbid anybody should be uncomfortable for any reason! Don't get me started.

RW: This brings me to this question of the environment. Now a concrete reality is beginning to impinge on us. Depending on where I'm living, something going to burn my house down or dry out my garden or the price of fuel oil goes way out of sight. The effects are spreading. I guess most dramatically in the Arctic and Anarctic regions which is the area you have a deep feeling about. And now you're paintings are reflecting the Arctic regions.

Now you just attended a conference just a few weeks ago. What was it called?

IS: Eco Arts. It was founded by a woman in Boulder, Marda Kirn, who brought together scientists and artists because of her concern: how do we raise consciousness about what is happening to the planet? There were multiple conferences and presentations between artists and scientists who were working and talking together and the Indigenous Film Festival went on, which was very, very interesting. It all was about addressing what's happening and how to respond to this? For me, it became very personal, because the Arctic is going really quickly, a whole lot quicker than any of the models predicted. Ice melt that models predicted for forty years from now happened this summer. That was very disturbing.

One of the climatologists was showing a computer model of how the ice is retreating and retreating and as I watched and listened I kind of moved into this

altered state. It was like watching a sonogram of a human heart and when a human heart gets out of balance, it starts fibrillating. The atriums can't keep up with the ventricles. It desperately tries to do that and unless it's put back in balance, it goes into asystole. It's over.

That living, vibrating organicity of what is happening affected me very deeply. It's interesting because, up to that point, I was saying "okay, Richard wants to see some more of these photos from Alaska. Well, maybe I'll get around to it, but I've got all this work going on around the studio."

But somehow I came back from this conference and I started pulling all these negatives out and saying, I am going to do something with these! These are excerpts of an entire way of life that is gone. The photographs of that ice, a couple of

scientists have seen them, and they told me that level of thickness is no longer happening. It's gone. It's not coming back. And that's very hard to hear.

RW: You were telling me some of the specifics of this catastrophic change, that walrus are doing strange things..

IS: They're becoming carnivores. They are not carnivorous. They are eating seals and because they have to swim out so far,

they're leaving their pups. Their pups are abandoned. The salmon can't navigate the rivers anymore. They're not coming. This area was incredibly rich for summer migration of birds from all over the world. But eighty per cent are gone. They haven't come back. They're not coming back. And the polar bears are starving. The ice isn't forming thick enough. They're dying of exhaustion. They're not having their young and the young that they are having are showing gene mutations because of inadequacy. And that's just parts of what I heard, just a piece of it.

RW: Now you were telling me about someone who had said they were already past the tipping point.

IS: This was the Sami at the indigenous film festival.

RW: The Sami. Is that name of a tribe?



IS: They used to be known as the Laplanders, the indigenous reindeer herders. They are also fisher people. They live above the Arctic Circle of Norway, Sweden, Finland and part of Russia. When I was doing my Fulbright and was in Denmark, I traveled to Helsinki, because I was studying Sami shamanism. These are the Sami People who are going for indigenous rights for land and water. They have been deeply affected by global climate change. The forests in that area are now dying because of the infestation of bugs that are coming in. It's not cold enough to freeze the bugs out. The reindeer, grazing grounds are all changing. The willow, which was never found above the Arctic Circle, is now above it. In Alaska, beaver are now living above the Arctic Circle. This is unheard of.

So anyway, one of the participants in the indigenous film festival is a woman of Sami descent. She'd been over there to visit and she brought this message back. Many of the Sami now feel the tipping point has happened. They've lost their cultural soul—that's a direct quote—and now feel that their work is to die with dignity. We're talking an entire culture of people, that that's now their work, to demonstrate to the world how to die with dignity.

From everything that these scientists presented, both the climatologists and the glaciologists the tipping point is here. And we have not done enough.

It's painful. It's so painful that it's like getting a diagnosis of someone you love very dearly saying they've got six months. I really think when you allow the consciousness of what's happening into your psyche, you go through Kubler-Ross's stages[On Death and Dying].

There have only been two things in my life I've been willing to lay my life down for. One was a situation during the civil rights movement and the other is this. I've searched and wondered how did the great thinkers and philosophers and mystics of our time deal with utter destruction and death. I've looked at Bonhoeffer's work again and Gandhi's work.

RW: This is very disturbing to hear about.

IS: For me, it's a real, raw issue. Larry Mercurieff, who is a traditionally trained Aleut healer and also has a Ph. D. in environmental sciences and serves on the Alaska commission for environmental issues asks, how did we get to this point? What is happening? He thinks the scientists have missed something. He talks about the disengagement of soul. Then you take that a step further. How do I—this one lone individual—what do I do? What do I do? I'm coming to realize that all I can do is witness to this.

So I am choosing to do this as a painter. I couldn't bear to look at anything but ice, initially. I couldn't bear to go back into those photographs, knowing what's happening up there. And it was actually a very interesting practice just to do that, to say, okay, I'm going to do this! I'm going to go through all these and look at them. That poem from Rilke I Live My Life In Widening Circles in the preface of the collection of photographs is the only thing that got me through that.

I don't know. I've actually thought of going and sitting on the edge of the arctic and just doing practice. And if I die up there, I die up there. Those are the kinds of things I've thought of. My husband said, Gee, I wish you'd find another way to lay your life down [laughs].

RW: Having met you, it seems to me you have the possibility of representing things in person to people.

IS: I don't know. Not long ago I'd read about a glaciologist studying ice in Antarctica and I got the impulse to call him, a cold call. Well, I got him at the university. So I introduced myself. I said, I'm an artist. I recently applied for an NSF grant to go to Antarctica and I'm very interested to hear about some of your experiences with ice. I paint ice. There was dead silence on the phone[laughs]. But then he said, "You paint ice?" I said, yes. I told him what I was painting and said a few things about Arctic ice.

He was so excited. He said, "You know, artists could really do something! Artists could really let people know what's happening! People really need to know what's happening!" He was just impassioned. So we got talking.

RW: I think that's what people have to do. Follow those impulses.

IS: He was just delightful. He told me all about his computer models and this ice and that ice.

RW: Are you going to do that?

IS: If I get the grant, I sure am!

RW: Not only could you paint what you see, but you could give talks, too.

IS: And that's what I'm thinking. Writing the grant, you have to say how you're going to reach the greatest audience. So I've had very interesting conversations with different people—Rebecca Nestle at Grace Cathedral, Carola DeRooy, gallery manager at Point Reyes National Seashore, Zoos and Natural History Museums in Denver and a radio interview in Boulder. It's been a very interesting exercise.

So I put in to go to Palmer Station. I'll let you know if I get it.

RW: Don't give up, if you don't.

IS: No. I decided I would reapply the following year if I don't get it. I already made that decision.

About the Author

Richard Whittaker is the founding editor of works & conversations and West Coast editor of Parabola magazine

- See more at: <http://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=156#sthash.IFZDJwA4.dpuf>