

## **Eqqaamaniaruk toqusussaagavit**

The beat of the sea on the shore that provided the rhythm for this story is the sound of the Nuuk fjord. The Greenlandic capital is placed on a small tongue of land in the vast system of fjords on the west coast of the island. In the part of Nuuk known as Nuusuaq there is a spot by the water with a view of the mountain Sermitsiaq, the city landmark, and Nordlandet where the Sun sets in the summertime. Here the city feeling vanishes in the view of a landscape that only hints at the immensity of the island itself. And here the words of an old, wise man linger. *When you, with your problems, anxieties, your loneliness, with your attachments, are not there, then beauty is. And where there is beauty and love, life becomes an extraordinary movement.* For a moment no one was there, and the landscape shifted slightly.

My sister and I arrived in Nuuk not knowing what to expect. Yet we brought many pictures with us. Greenland. The world's largest island, home to the Inuit, a distant land of snow and ice, the country of our forefathers, a Danish colony, wild and untouched nature. Some of our pictures slowly began to dissolve as we became part of the pulse of the place teaching us a great deal about our own stereotypes. The dualism of 'coloniser' and 'colonised' gives rise to a complex of pictures of pictures which reflect in most aspects of life. We also learned that the Danish people have not even begun acknowledging their role in Greenland. There is thus a barrier of ignorance to overcome before a clear picture of the state of affairs in the continuing story of Denmark and Greenland can emerge. Acknowledgement of the roles played by different actors in any relation between peoples is the first step towards a clear picture of the state of affairs anywhere in the world. And, as we are not the people with whom we identify, acknowledgement of the roles we play in our personal lives is the only place we can possibly begin.

One evening in Nuuk I met a person who embodied this truth. Wanting diversion from our routines we had gone to the cinema to watch a film. To extend the evening we decided to visit a pub before going home. We sat down next to a young guy sitting on his own, occasionally conversing with passers-by. When I asked him for a cigarette there was some confusion, and I wondered whether he had answered me in Danish or Greenlandic. I got the cigarette but no clue as to whether he had understood my words. A little later he joined our table. His name was Hans and he did speak Danish – it seemed he was just a little uncomfortable with the pictures of pictures we had initially impressed on him.

We managed to overcome the difficulties of language and differences of experience and the conversation quickly developed from the usual relating of backgrounds. With reference to the historic relations between Greenland and Denmark, I made a remark about the importance of learning from each other. Hans responded that what is important is to learn about yourself because you must know yourself before you can really learn from anyone else. He hit the nail on the head. Throughout the time we spent in Nuuk we had a feeling that the pictures of 'coloniser vs. colonised' overshadowed much of the present debate in Greenland. We ourselves absorbed some of these pictures. 'Greenlandic' and 'Danish' had become conceptually blurred because of a reluctance to reflect on sensitive issues in the colonial past and the post-colonial present. Hans was a reflective personality who was actively searching his own identity for solid ground. We discovered this searching was something we shared and suddenly we were learning from each other.

Hans taught us a saying he had translated from Latin into Greenlandic, which he felt conveyed his perspective on life. *Eqqaamaniaruk toqusussaagavit*, remember your death. I related to this, not as a morbid comment on the inevitable decay of the body, but as an affirmation of the human condition. There is only one certainty in life and that is death. In fact, the two go together. In this respect, the tendency to avoid thinking

about one's own death amounts to denial, and viewed from a collective perspective we are experiencing self-deception on a large scale. The fascination with youth reflects everywhere in modern society: large sections of the economy depend on it (diets, beauty products, fashion, plastic surgery, etc.), politics is becoming a career for young 'entrepreneurs' (one could say that politics today is more a matter of problem solving than applying accumulated *wisdom*), and in the social sphere 'the old' are less and less a part of our everyday (think of how many people are living the last years of their lives in loneliness). It is not an overstatement to say that youth pervades the ideas and images that govern our lives on a collective scale. The other side of this picture is that death is often said to be 'appaling', 'cruel' and even 'unjust'.

Besides being an act of self-deception, we might lose an opportunity for learning something by denying ourselves thoughts of our mortality. If we manage to look at the prospect of dying without anxiety we might better understand life itself. What it means to be alive, what we want to do with our time and how we best achieve our deeper goals in life. We might feel more comfortable in our lives not having to worry about the inevitable. In the context of this enquiry we can use the picture of 'not being' to understand the roles we play every day and all the pictures that make up our identity as human beings. If we want our pictures to reflect what really is, we must begin by looking at the identities we carry in our own lives. We must learn from each other but first we must first know ourselves.

The discussion of 'personal identity' in Western philosophy has, broadly speaking, been an argument between those who thought identity was connected to some essence (sometimes called a 'soul') and those who linked identity with memory. As no one has been able to show what a soul might consist in, the philosophers arguing for memory as a criteria for identity eventually gained the upper hand. There is a documentary about a guy who suffered memory loss that illustrates the problem better than most philosophers' argumentation. "Unknown White Male" tells the story of a young stock broker who woke up one morning, on the subway somewhere in the suburbs of New York, not knowing who or where he was. He had suffered an extremely rare form of memory loss where his brain had seemingly discarded virtually all memory of his past life. He couldn't remember anything about his family, friends or personal experiences (but he retained the memory of motor skills). His life changed completely, he gave up his job, took up new interests and found a new partner. In this case it would probably be correct to say that his identity had changed. Another way of saying this is that the pictures that formerly directed his life had vanished. He began reflecting different ones. As these pictures changed his life changed. In this way it could be possible to live many lives during a lifetime. And in this light the 'core picture' we might entertain of ourselves appears illusive. We play many roles in our daily lives. Maybe some of the problems we experience arise because we take one or two of them too seriously?