

My Pal, Oliver Who Lived His Life as a Demonstration

By Devta Khalsa



Oliver outside the entrance to his first underground hut with Pal and Jewel.

My first and most profound impression of Oliver Cameron was, “Wow, this man has more integrity than anyone I have ever known!” By integrity I mean he lived by his beliefs that were formed out of his experience of life. It took no time at all for us to become close friends. In the remote bush you have to trust those closest to you and in turn, be trustworthy. Oliver shared himself with me on a very deep level from the beginning as if we were already lifelong friends. His story telling was so real and so honest that it made me feel as though I had always known him. His stories always included teaching; issuing forth from the lessons he had learned in life. Oliver was a natural and patient teacher. I was eager to absorb the jewels of wisdom he had derived from his humble journey. His gentle manner expressed confidence and compassion; letting me know our friendship was making me a better person.

As a young boy he wanted a pocket knife, however, his family was too poor to afford to buy him one. His determined inventive mind found a way to fashion a knife for himself using old abandoned tool parts he collected. It was a good knife and worked well. This started a lifetime of making the tools he needed.

Oliver called himself a natural philosopher; his was an experiential philosophy rather than an intellectual one. He investigated life deeply, unraveling mysteries that only revealed themselves through careful observation of direct life experience. After reaching a point of understanding he integrated each mystery into the fabric of a vast philosophy he exposed in oral histories and story-telling. From then on he went through life walking the truth that he had pursued and discovered.

I met Oliver in his later years when his hands were too shaky to type or write. I felt privileged to be the scribe of his final life conclusions. His need for a steady hand was what brought us together.

I was given the opportunity to serve Oliver by editing and typing the last few editions of what he considered to be his most significant work; "A Few Thoughts About Life; Good News, for Sure". (On-line at www.olivercameron.org)

On the first evening I met Oliver I was curiously impressed by his slight humped-over build. This was supported by a cane in each hand; carved out of birch branches from trees near his bush home. We were having dinner at a restaurant in Fairbanks, Alaska. Oliver had flown in from his hand-built underground house at a remote lake in the Minchumina area to see his daughter, Dorene Schiro. Dorene and I had met ten days prior. We had accompanied a mutual friend out to her family homestead at Kilo Hot Springs in the Brooks Range to help clean up "bear damage". The bears had hosted quite an event, leaving nothing unscathed. All three cabins looked like King Kong partied there for days with a group of friends.

Oliver was a simple man with a plain diet and didn't eat that night at the restaurant, just visited. That made me wonder, "What does he know that I don't?" I secretly envied his apparent self-discipline. A series of visits in Fairbanks and out at his home at the lake would help answer that question.

"Come out and visit any time." Oliver said, extending an open invitation. He had not escaped the familiar bush disease of loneliness. I felt a passion inside of me stir as I promised myself and him that I would do that soon. The time for our visit came as summer was slipping into early signs of fall. Oliver made the arrangements and paid for the three passenger pontoon plane that delivered me, my six year old son, Sat Sarbat, and our border collie, Jewel, to the obscure lake that was just a number on the map. It was one of the many numbered lakes that were sprinkled across the map like splattered paint.

Oliver had a long-standing relationship with a local bush pilot who checked on him during the summer when the lake was free of ice. The pilot brought him mail and supplies when he was going to be flying hunters and fishermen in and out of the bush. "Bring a bear dog and a gun," Oliver had warned. And so Jewel and my .308 rifle came along as our warning and protection systems.

On a calm sunny day we embarked on the journey. It was a short hour and a half bush flight from Fairbanks out to the lake. Our pilot made a reconnaissance run and fly-by over Oliver's cabin to alert him we had arrived. He then gracefully glided the pontoon plane onto the small lake. I couldn't see the cabin beneath us because its sod roof had aged its way into the landscape. It had become entirely camouflaged with fireweed and willow bushes. Only the paths suggested habitation.

"Look for three fifty gallon drums tucked into the tree line," the pilot instructed us when it was time to find evidence of the trailhead. Oliver greeted us lakeside as the plane ferried into the grassy dock. We loaded some gear into the fifty gallon drums for protection while we made numerous trips carrying and shuffling supplies up the rutted worn path, a five minute walk to the knoll Oliver had selected for his home site.

Oliver wore a backpack loaded with supplies. His collie wore a dog pack which he loaded with water jugs filled at the lake. Scrutinizing my preparedness for the hike, he instructed me in the proper position for carrying my gun for quick response, advising me not to hesitate to shoot a bear. Securing himself between two walking sticks he led the way up the path to home.

Sat Sarbat and I hoisted our backpacks and followed him up the trail. Despite the absence of snow we also pulled two loaded toboggan sleds along behind us. When we emerged into the clearing at Oliver's home site we wandered around absorbing the scene. Eventually the profound silence was broken when Sat Sarbat asked,

“Mom, is this an ancient village?” I answered, “No, this is Oliver’s home. But it looks like one, doesn’t it?” From that moment forward Oliver began teaching us how to live in his “ancient village”.

There was a white canvas wall tent set up waiting for us. It contained a three legged stool which was an example of Oliver’s philosophy that you never use more materials than absolutely necessary. This theme ran through everything that he made. A large rectangular metal can had been turned on its side and converted into a wood stove for cooking and keeping the tent warm. A wood platform sat on the ground under it forming a hearth to prevent melting the plastic tarp that was spread on the ground for a floor.

There was a pair of pliers lying next to the stove for removing hot pots from the stove surface. This was where we would be cooking and heating wash water for the next few weeks. A small neatly stacked pile of wood lay cut and ready to go into the stove. A solid wood plank served as a three legged table which was where Sat Sarbat did his home school studies. Our bedrolls were slightly elevated on branches on the floor. Oliver left us to arrange ourselves into the small but adequate tent space.

Next to the tent was a shed made of vertical poles. The floor of the shed had a four foot deep hole dug in the dirt with a heavy wooden door fashioned to fit over it. The hole stayed cool and was where fresh food was stored in five gallon buckets which could be pulled in and out of the hole by a rope. This also kept food safe from animals and Oliver had hand carved wooden hinges and latches intended to be secure against invasion by clever animals.



Float plane arriving at Oliver’s bush lake.



Oliver stashes supplies in the barrels at the grassy dock.



Oliver on the trail.



Our encampment is made up of a white wall tent with stove pipe and rain tarp.
(photo courtesy Dorene Schiro)



Sat Sarbat tends the fire in the home-made wood stove.



A series of cans makes up the wood stove.



Sat Sarbat studies at the three legged table in the wall tent.



Shed for storing food and supplies with a cold storage hole in the floor. (Photo courtesy of Dorene Schiro)

We kept a five gallon bucket in a shed with a toilet seat on it for an “indoor privy”. Grass was picked and put in the bottom of the bucket to make it easy to clean by dumping it into the big pit behind the dog yard. These were our basic accommodations and we were comfortable. Whatever our need might have been, Oliver anticipated it and brought us whatever tool we needed well in advance of any evidence to me that we would be requiring the

item. Somehow he always knew what was needed. Decades of adapting to the rigors of bush life had made him a self-sufficient and wise man.

Oliver never left his cabin without his custom-made leather tool belt around his waist, his bear gun, his bear dog Pal, and a walking stick in each hand. The tool belt kept essential tools conveniently handy. The gun and anything else he needed to accomplish any task was pulled along behind in a sled whose tow rope was braced across his chest. This followed him along the trail winter or summer.

In earlier days Oliver's winter travel was by dog sled and snow shoes. There was a beautiful dog sled which he had hand-built stored in the shed and two pairs of snow shoes he had made hung in the stairway going down into the underground hut. The sled was designed to be sleek, strong and light weight; customized to withstand tough trails while offering the least possible burden to the dogs.

Across the path from our tent site was the abandoned dog yard. The sturdy dog houses built of logs were still standing. The floors were elevated off of the ground so the dogs could go into the house and sleep on warm straw or crawl under the house and sleep on cool dirt. Temperature and mosquitos determined the dog's choice. The pitched roof created an attic where fresh straw and dog food were stored for easy access. The thatched grass roof formed a large overhang protecting the dog house underneath from infiltration of rain and snow and assured the dogs couldn't climb into the food stores. Such attention to simplicity and details of "form follows function" is a basic principle of sustainable living which Oliver had mastered.

There was a woven willow branch fence defining the perimeter of the dog yard to keep puppies contained and safe. The vacated yard was now a good source of tall grass used for lining the privy bucket. Oliver provided us with a hand-made scythe for the daily task of cutting grass. The handles on the scythe were designed for efficient torque making the job quick and easy. Just outside the woven fence were remnants of an old dog sled vanishing into the moss of the boreal forest, leaving the details of its last trip home to the imagination of the viewer.



Dog house with thatched roof and storage for food and straw.



Woven fence in the dog yard.



Sat Sarbat cuts grass with Oliver's hand crafted scythe.



A hand built dog sled fades into the moss outside the dog yard.



Oliver tying thatch for the dog house roof'.
(Photo courtesy of Dorene Schiro)



Log work detail on a dog house.

Oliver said when hitching his harnessed dogs to the sled he preferred to tie them to individual tuglines connected to a fan hitch on the sled, as the early Natives did. This permits the dogs to fan out as in a pack, picking their own path through obstacles of the pack ice. In recent years he only kept one dog for a companion and to warn him of bears. “To be my ears and eyes,” he commented of his aging body. He advised that it is best to choose the most timid, picked-on pup in the litter when looking for a good “bear dog”. Timid dogs are more alert to danger and will bark to express their fear. He always named his dogs “Pal” because they were his sole companion.

Oliver told quite a few bear stories and Pal was always the hero. “You never can be too careful. Never go out without your gun and your bear dog,” he insisted. I always stayed acutely alert when away from camp and my sensitivity increased the longer I was in the bush. Nonetheless, it was comforting to know the additional eyes and ears of our Jewel were on guard as well.

Oliver gave Sat Sarbat his first survival lesson when he handed him an old tobacco tin with leather straps wired on so it could be secured to a belt. In the tin was a tightly folded thread-bare blue hanky, a waterproof container of matches, a small sugar serving spoon with a shortened handle, and a tiny stainless steel measuring cup with a curving handle looped just big enough to get two small fingers through. A small piece of old khaki cloth was attached as a cover for the tobacco tin.

Oliver instructed him to keep this “survival kit” on his belt at all times because it was all he needed to save his life. He then demonstrated that it could be used to collect and heat water, prepare a warm meal, or pick berries into. The cloth over the top was to keep the berries from bouncing out. The tin could be used to boil a chunk of squirrel or fish if need be. To this he added a monocular that Sat Sarbat was to keep in his pack so he could identify distant animals. The monocular had been one half of a pair of binoculars that Oliver separated so he now had two viewing devices and each was half the original weight.

The versatility of a worn hanky should never be underestimated. It can be used to protect your face from strong sun reflection off the snow, serve as wind protection, help keep the ears warm, deflect sweat from running into your eyes when working the body hard, as a tourniquet or you can spit on it to wash your face. I could see in Sat Sarbat’s expression that he hoped he didn’t need to use it but he faithfully carried it on his belt and understood why.

When berry season was peaking we devoted many days to gathering boreal blueberries and lowbush cranberries. Picking berries into the small cup Sat Sarbat kept in his survival kit, and then dumping them into the tobacco tin proved to be a convenient way of gathering berries while moving through the bushes. As Oliver had suggested, “Then if you trip or drop your cup all of the berries won’t be lost.” When we were sitting in the moss picking berries the khaki cloth really did serve to keep them from bouncing out of the tobacco tin.



Sat Sarbat and Jewel picking berries using the “survival kit” Oliver gave him.

Oliver believed that it cultivated human dignity to make things for ourselves that we need. There was a book shelf by his bed containing worn books describing how to build or hand craft many tools. This was intentionally the only kind of book he had on the shelf; “useful books” as he described them. Oliver made most of his own tools and everything had his signature alteration on it.

The handle of his ax had a hole strategically positioned in it removing the unnecessary material. This would make the tool lighter to carry while maintaining its strength. Tables and stools were three legged. One wall of his cabin was hung with the tools he fashioned to build underground houses without resorting to power tools.

Underground dwellings are amazingly efficient and this is why they appealed to Oliver. They can be built by hand, require the fewest materials to gain the maximum protection, and are easy to heat. At his final home site Oliver built one small underground hut to live in while he was building his bigger dwelling which took six years to complete. Hand cut and peeled poles or trees were the major building material. A plastic vapor barrier was secured against the dirt walls by the poles to keep warm air in and prevent condensation and sand from infiltrating into the living space. The roof was a series of layers of plastic, poles and sod. This was a very protective dwelling and I imagined myself as a denning bear when I was in it. It was designed and built to create solutions to arctic challenges and was reliably comfortable.

The dirt removed for the house was used to berm up the top of the walls and cover the roof so that from the outside the house looked like a natural mound. A small ground level window at the top of one wall let in natural light and had a wooden shutter that could be closed from inside in case a curious bear came visiting. There was a vent beside the window to control the humidity level in the house.

Over the years Oliver’s influence touched many people throughout the bush communities. Being generous by nature, sharing his knowledge, he built many underground dwellings for others as well.

A small solar panel charged a battery which powered one small LED light and a radio so that Oliver could listen to Mukluk Messages every night during dinner. Mukluk Messages is a program on KIAM-FM radio in Nenana. People call in personal messages to the radio station which then announces the recipient’s name and delivers the message over the air three times daily. This communication system keeps people connected, helps to ease the burdens of isolation and gets urgent messages to bush dwellers. The messages also stream live on the Internet at <http://tunein.com/radio/options/Mukluk-Messages-p367518/>. Listening to the program as a daily routine keeps folks informed about their neighbors and offers a little information about the outside world. It’s also entertaining and often even funny. The radio served as a resource for long term weather forecasts which could inform Oliver of how to pack for lengthy excursions into the bush, or visits to a neighbor thirty miles away.

Oliver taught us numerous survival skills. He started by taking tracings of our feet and having us sew moccasins out of soft tanned hide. We chose from three different styles and completed our new footwear in two sittings. Oliver emphasized in this lesson that the essence of any craft is building ones’ self-worth, self-confidence and dignity.

Another universally applied lesson was to plan a project carefully so there is as little material wasted as possible. Designing for simplicity and quality instills an attitude of valuing your time. Finding the patience to do your best quality work develops appreciation for the mastery one is capable of and keeps us reaching for our highest potential. By striving for longevity in the quality of your product you will never be wasteful of time, materials, tools or underestimate your quality as a human being. These were the values that worked their way into every task Oliver set himself upon.

One sunny afternoon we went for a walk and I learned how to look for the perfect size and curvature of branch for carving tool handles and kitchen utensils. Being able to visualize your product in the raw material with the least amount of alteration was the goal. My relationship with the forest was altered as a tree or bush became more than a tree. It became any number of tools I would need.

As I began to see it differently with my eyes I saw it differently with my heart as well. A deeper friendship with the forest I depended upon grew with each day's new task. I was excited to get to work creating a utensil and Oliver had a variety of carving tools he had fashioned to meet every curvature I wanted to make.

Survival is rooted in knowing that the uses of the forest and abundance for our existence are symbiotic to the health of the ecosystem. If Oliver noticed a tree was weakening he would tend it like a friend, giving it extra care and love. He would give it plenty of fresh rain water that he harvested off of the roofs of his sheds. He added to it his own urine as fertilizer and the trees responded with vigor. In this way he developed relationships with the flora that shared the knoll of his home site.

A home need never be without several sizes of birch bark baskets. A handy container can be made by stripping a section of bark off of a birch tree and folding it into a basket. The folds forming the basket are held in place by using sinew to sew spruce root around its rim. It can be any size or shape you need. There is an optimal size spruce root to dig up. Not so big that it is tough or breaks when bent, but big enough to be split in half making a flat surface to rest against the birch bark, thereby doubling the length of root available for use. These baskets are very durable and light weight to carry. They can be made on the trail when necessary. Birch bark is very beautiful and can be artfully selected for its subtle and varied tones of pastel colors.

Oliver had developed a keen eye for subtlety. By cultivating a supreme relationship with Mother Nature, he protected Her through wise usage and conservation of resources. His intimacy with the forest evolved through time and experience. The smells in the wind, the warmth or coolness of it against his skin provided the weather forecast and predicted the changing seasons. What the Wind Spirit brought each day determined the activity for that day.

Every day, however, was wood cutting day. Oliver designed a buck saw and saw horse that made wood cutting an efficient task. When he traveled to a distant camp where he would be based for a significant amount of time, packing a lighter weight sled with only the most necessary gear was important. The innovative design of Oliver's buck saw was such that he could carry just a saw blade in the sled and upon arrival at his destination, he would carve the handle out of local wood. He taught me how to make this handy disassembling saw whose proportions reflected the optimum size of a piece of firewood, the size of your stove and the size of the hand that was cutting it. The handle should just fit your grip, the length desired for the piece of wood should be measurable on the saw frame and the depth of the saw should fit the diameter of the logs being cut.

My favorite three legged innovation was a tripod made of a forking branch forming a broad U-shaped split. This was turned upside down so the two forking branches touched the ground. A third supporting leg was notched into the main trunk bracing it in an angled vertical position creating a stable frame that could serve many functions, from cooking to target practicing. Three holes provide versatility in angle of the lean and the depth of the cradle available to hold varying tree diameters.



Notice the simple elegant joinery where the supporting pole tapers at the end to fit into the hole. This also holds it securely in place so the forking branch doesn't slide down the pole.



Sat Sarbat with Oliver's saw and tripod sawhorses. This tripod has a more V shaped forking branch.



This tripod has a broad U-shaped forking branch.

When a pair of tripods are used together as saw horses holding trees to be cut for firewood, the back one can be moved forward as the tree gets shorter. It is not a machine but has moving parts that make the task enormously more efficient. A number of these kinds of innovations around the home site contributed to making this a comfortable lifestyle.



Oliver preparing food inside his cabin with his books along the wall. (photo courtesy of Dorene Schiro)



Tools hanging on the wall inside of Oliver's cabin.



A window was set at ground level with dirt bermed up around it and over the top of the cabin, forming a thickly insulated mound.



Oliver is using a hand adze while carving a utensil with Sat Sarbat.
Notice the survival kit and cup hanging on Sat Sarbat's belt.



Sharing Oliver's tools is a precious privilege. Sat Sarbat is using a hand adze which Oliver blacksmithed. Notice the holes in the end of the handle to reduce its weight and the graceful curve of the handle making it ergonomically comfortable to use.



An old tree stump recycles into a stable chopping block. Notice the slender curving axe handle Oliver has designed. It captures beauty, grace, strength and functionality that expresses tool making as an art.



Sat Sarbat practices using a hatchet.



Oliver saws wood outside the stairwell descending into his underground cabin.
(Photo courtesy of Dorene Schiro)



Oliver gives a lesson on the importance of keeping the tools sharp and in good working order.



Oliver teaches Sat Sarbat how to make himself a walking stick.

Sadly, the opportunistic squirrel population had to be controlled because they stole much needed chinking insulation and put holes in clothing scavenging warm bits for their nests. They assumed the stored provisions were for them. Only metal or very thick wood is secure from the persistent teeth of squirrels. We never went out hunting for squirrels nor killed the entire local population. The bolder squirrels that were killed to control the population balance on the home turf were always put to use. Every few days Oliver had me take out the rifle and bring him some squirrels. He taught us how to easily peel the hide off of them in one piece.



Oliver gives a lesson in peeling the hide off of a squirrel in one piece.



Sat Sarbat learns to shoot and safely handle a 22 rifle.

It was an awkward moment the first time he served us squirrel stew and I had to tell him we were vegetarian. Oliver and Pal partook of their only source of fresh meat, the never-to-be-wasted squirrels, while Sat Sarbat and I ate rice we had packed in.

Sawing off the butt of a 22 rifle to fit Sat Sarbat, Oliver taught him how to use a gun. Even at the young age of seven it was an essential safety and survival tool he should be comfortable using for that rare possibility that he may find himself alone or isolated. As long as there are guns in camp the safety rule is that everyone knows how to properly handle them.

There were several outbuildings strategically located throughout the home site. Oliver had two large caches where he stored all vulnerable items such as food, paper products, clothing, tanned hides, blankets, family pictures and such. The caches could also serve as additional sleeping quarters if need be. He generously permitted Sat Sarbat and me to dig through his precious lifetime collection of memorabilia and additional supplies, all the while telling stories of years past, bringing people and events alive as if we were viewing them on a movie screen.

The caches were high enough to prevent invasion by bears, and one of them could be used for additional sleeping quarters if need be. The tall heavy wooden ladder was rigged on a rope and pulley so we could raise it when we were ready to climb up, or descend from our adventures into Oliver's past. He instructed to lower the ladder when we were aloft, so that we would never find ourselves in the precarious position of having a curious, opportunistic bear climb the ladder in pursuit of a meal.



Note the rope by Sat Sarbat's arm for raising and lowering the ladder when in the cache. The notch by the top of the left vertical pole of the ladder holds the ladder in place so it won't slip sideways.



Detail of ladder rung notched into vertical support.

The ladder to the cache was tall and needed to be sturdy and safe for toting supplies up and down. Oliver needed to repair a few rungs so one afternoon we were given a lesson on ladder building and notching the rungs into the poles. A few carefully placed slices with the ax formed notches in the vertical poles for the rungs to set on which received the weight, transferring it to the pole. Because safety was a priority Oliver used nails to secure the notched rungs onto the poles. He used the limited supply of nails very sparingly, preferring to lash poles together or whittle joints and hinges out of wood whenever possible.

There was a two foot high strip of metal around the posts of the cache to prevent small animals from climbing them and getting to the supplies. Rifles were carried up the ladder with us as well. Oliver pointed out we would feel pretty ridiculous if we were up in the cache observing a bear below playing with our gun. Life was about being smart and being safe.



In most cases when working with unmilled poles, creating joinery was accomplished by skillfully placing a slice in the wood to flatten the connecting surfaces. Oliver had mastered this graceful yet precise movement, which looked as easy as cutting butter when I watched him. I lacked the same finesse when it was my turn to repair a rung.

The cache held many stories and memories. A tin roof provides clean rain water in the pond below. The poles used in wall construction were hewn on the ends for better nail penetration. A two foot piece of sheet metal or stove pipe encircled the columns to keep small animals from climbing into the cache.

Beside the cache Oliver had dug a good sized pit that caught rainwater from the roof. On laundry day we would dip water from the stagnant pond using a pole with a rusty tin can attached to one end. We agitated the clothes in the wash bucket with a pole, scrubbed them on a wash board, and then used a hand crank wringer to press the excess water out before hanging them in the sun to dry.



Dipper detail: observe the gently curving handle for comfortable dipping.



A wall tent on a high platform makes another cache and serves as a guest tent when necessary.

There are several sheds to be explored filled with resources for tool making.

Spruce trees had been cut down and leaned vertically all along the exterior walls of the sheds as a bear deterrent because bears don't like to get spruce needles in their paws. The trees also provided shade for the plastic tarps which lined the shed walls, helping to prevent the plastic from deteriorating as a result of ultraviolet light exposure.



Spruce poles lean against the exterior shed walls with dry branches still on them serving as a bear deterrent.



More sheds with spruce trees shading the plastic from ultraviolet exposure and protecting them from bears.

A buck saw, small sharp hatchet, and sharp pocket knife were the minimum essential tools for carving a home into the bush. Add in a few specialized carving tools and one can become more intricate with their craftsmanship and finish work. Oliver's demonstration regarding life is that the growth of one's skill as a craftsman and the growth of one's soul are symbiotic as the craftsman, tool, material and source of material become one.



Sat Sarbat prepares the laundry pails with water from the pond off the cache roof.

There was a skeleton of an abandoned greenhouse lashed together using bent poles so it took the familiar arching shape of a Quonset hut. The weather had long since disrobed its plastic covering. Two sheds comprised a storehouse of collected metal parts and pieces that could be fashioned into anything he needed.

The lake Oliver lived on was a small lake and much of it was pretty shallow. It was home to beaver, swans, loons and other small animals. Oliver used a canoe to paddle to the deepest part of the lake where the water was the cleanest to dip the jugs for drinking water. We would still have to boil it before drinking. The water always tasted fresh, clean and a bit sweet. The trek back up to the cabin was arduous wearing packs loaded with heavy water jugs. Even Pal carried water in his dog pack; one gallon on each side.



Oliver and Pal on a water run.

Fireweed blooms going to seed and ripe berries are the first signs that the intense yet brief summer is coming to a close. Gathering blueberries and cranberries provided an essential contribution to the winter food stores as berries were one of the few sources of fresh food available and they are healthful in numerous ways. Blueberries can be dried for storage, and cranberries can last up to three years when crushed and left in the cooler in their own juice. Five gallon buckets of berries were stored in the hole dug in the shed floor.



Berry cleaning station outside the entrance of Oliver's first underground home.

Oliver had a berry cleaning station set up outside the first cabin. He set up a framed piece of screen as step one to remove debris and small berries, followed by rolling the berries down a sloping wool blanket to separate any remaining leaves which would cling to the blanket as the berries rolled to the bottom.

The highlight of being meditative outside for hours berry picking is witnessing the migration of tens of thousands of Sandhill Cranes. Flocks of hundreds of cranes would pass overhead one after another all day long for days, even weeks, during the height of the southerly migration.

We could hear them before we saw them. Sometimes, there would be a spiraling updraft of wind current which the flocks would converge in. In this wind current they would break formation and spiral upward in a magnificent glide, singing their song and dancing in the updraft. Their large bodies would become specks in the sky as they soared beyond the levels that bush planes occupy.

The cranes were signaling that we better be helping Oliver prepare for winter. Nothing, however, can prepare a person for the loneliness that the human soul endures during a long winter. Like the perpetual cycle of dormancy that holds a tree's sap captive, loneliness was a familiar companion to Oliver. In the long arctic days of summer when the light never leaves the sky and the sun inoculates everything with extra energy, we are empowered with a magical resource that helps us accomplish the preparations required to physically, mentally and emotionally navigate the cold and dark of a quiet internal winter.

Knowing the medicinal qualities of wild flora and drying plants for winter use is also important. Oliver told a story that one time he was deathly ill and thought he might die alone in his cabin. One afternoon all of the tree spirits came to him and told him to boil the bark of the tamarack tree and drink the tea. There was only one tamarack tree in the area and it was just a few feet outside his cabin door. He followed the precise instructions and was grateful to be healed.

When I was planning supplies to take to the bush with us I asked Oliver if I could bring him anything for the garden. He said, "Yes, bring me some chickweed." Chickweed is that wild annoyance that every garden is

inundated with and most people laboriously weed it out. I asked him why he wanted chickweed, of all things. He answered, "It's the easiest thing to grow."

It's true that it takes no care and thrives in the arctic climate. Chickweed is also very nutritious; packed with copper, iron, phosphorus, calcium, potassium and Vitamin C. It is one of the most versatile herbs to cook with and having many healing qualities is known as "the magical healer". This request showed me the kind of simplicity that can truly create a sustainable culture. It also helped me understand the selfless purity of Oliver's demonstration regarding how to live a practical and low-consumption lifestyle.

Oliver worked on his book, "A Few Thoughts About Life; Good News, for Sure", talking about the value of human friendship with Great Spirit-Creator. We had many talks as I typed out the edits for him. Dorene had sent a battery operated typewriter for us to use in the bush. The cultivation of a friendship with his Creator was one of Oliver's main purposes in life. All events in life were an opportunity to practice building this friendship. Sharing this idea is what Oliver felt was the most important contribution he could make to humanity.

Like everything Oliver made he edited and honed his message down to its bare bones essence. His final publication was a pocket sized booklet that could be carried effortlessly anywhere a person went. This booklet was the philosophical culmination of Oliver's conclusions about life. His unrealized dream was to travel down the Yukon River by boat, stopping at the villages, giving copies of his booklet to friends and villagers along the river. The message Oliver conveyed was born out of his experiences.

He was the philosopher who studied life and the human spirit as they converged in human experience. Oliver translated this experience in terms of an ever-developing friendship to be established between one's spirit and its Creator.

The integrity I sensed in Oliver from our first meeting was how thoroughly he lived his life, as a demonstration of the importance of developing human dignity through friendship, kindness and living by our Inner Guide as personified in the "Golden Rule". He understood the meaning of, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you", as saying, "Love is wanting others to have what is good for them and being willing to do what we can to make it possible."

Oliver understood that if he consumed anything beyond his simplest needs, he was crossing the line into taking something that someone else may need, thereby causing undue harm to another. His humble simplicity was to follow the divine course of peace and abundance for all sentient life forms. His emphasis was upon being self-sufficient, and developing his dignity by taking responsibility for his consumption patterns, as well as serving by teaching others. Oliver was a teacher on all levels and what I learned from him was the importance of knowing how to be true to my Self. Being true to Self was the secret behind his integrity.

The underground house was Oliver's signature of mastery at this demonstration. He showed me in detail how he made the house, explaining why he had made it that way. I learned that a comfortable home can be built without one stick of milled lumber and without any power tools. This house was the most efficient dwelling for the extreme arctic climate and the limited heat resources available. One thing that made it efficient was its modest consumption of materials and using local resources. Oliver lived a life of ultimate sustainability with minimal technology and demonstrated that anyone can do the same.

Oliver and I had long discussions covering many topics. He answered my questions and showed me who he was without reservation. Experience and exploration had been his teacher. It was an honor to use the tools Oliver had made. They were comfortable to hold and use, efficiently designed to fit the task.

As we were waiting by the grassy dock for the floatplane taking us back to Fairbanks to pull up, Oliver reached into his pocket and pulling out his pocket knife, he gifted it, telling me he wanted me to have it. It was a symbol of our friendship and I was humbled to receive it. The knife was very small, sleek and sharp. To this day I never go anywhere without this knife and the memories of my pal, Oliver.



Sat Sarbat learns how to set square corners and start his own underground house.



Oliver and Sat Sarbat prepare to navigate the lake on a water run.



Such is life at Oliver's "ancient village" in the bush.