

LONELINESS

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

What was the longest consecutive period of time that you had no contact with other people?¹

I don't know. There were several stretches where it was months instead of days, especially during breakup or freeze-up.

You had no contact at all?

Yeah. That was before I started using CB radios.

How did that affect you? Did you get lonely or anything?

We are social beings. I have lived alone a lot of time. There is always a certain underneath need for human companionship, but if you don't have it, you don't have it.

There are lots of people in that kind of fix. Even with people around, they're still very lonesome. I myself don't notice it any worse when I'm by myself than I do when I'm talking with somebody.

Actually, loneliness is more of a problem for me when I'm in town and there are people around, but I don't know them. You expect to have somebody to talk to then, but you don't.

When you're alone, you talk with the dog. It's amazing how sensitive some dogs are to your feelings, and to what you're saying.

When you finally get back with people after being alone for a long stretch, do you find that you get extra talkative?

No. I usually am not talkative. Most people want somebody to talk to, so I'd rather just listen. And quite often I don't have too much in common with most of the people I'm around, even those people out in the Bush.

Would you say you ever had cabin fever?

I have never had it, that I know of. There are times that I get pretty restless if I can't get out and spend a little time outside, but when I hear about cabin fever, I never get that kind of desperate feeling. I always have too much going on inside, as well as something that needs to be done and taken care of physically.

I don't know a good definition for cabin fever. I think it's a more subtle thing than most people realize. It's not a specific thing with specific symptoms to go with it—it can be different things with different people.

Quite often it's a matter of personalities. Some people can handle being with other people a lot more than others. Others want a little more elbow room, or they get to feeling frustrated or claustrophobic. If a person is sensitive to those things, you can try to understand how the other person is feeling.

What about the effect of a remote lifestyle on a family?

That goes along with cabin fever. It's very important, I feel, that each individual have a location that's his, where he can feel secure that anything he leaves there will be there when he comes back, and so forth.

I remember reading a humor piece in the Anchorage newspaper about two men who got dropped off for a week to hunt caribou in the Lake Clark area. They got their animals right away, but their plane wasn't scheduled to pick them up until the end of the week. The weather turned bad, and they were confined for days in a small tent.

The humor was about how they got on each other's nerves. At one point, one of them got irritated when he caught the other reading the label on his tube of foot cream.

I can understand that. Once I got so desperate for reading material that I walked up to Pete's and asked him for something I could read. He gave me the little Kreps book on woodcraft. I about wore it out, and could quote just about any page. I bought Pete a new copy.

Do you think the remote lifestyle is easier for men than it is for women?

I think that's true. I think it takes more planning and deliberate effort to make sure that the women get outside. Men get out naturally, with hunting and getting firewood. But it's hard for women to get out, especially with small children.

I remember one couple. The woman had no way to take the kids and get out. They only had one dog, and it wasn't trained. They didn't have a sled either, so she could hardly get out of the yard.

When I met them, I made a sled and harness for the dog. It made all the difference in the world. She could go down to the lake or go out picking berries, even if there was no snow on the ground. With a couple of dogs, she soon had the beginnings of a team. With the two little kids and a few things, those dogs could pull that sled most anyplace.

In my airport work I worked with a man from the FAA named Dick Griffith. He was well known for taking epic solo walking trips in northern Alaska—from Barrow to Anaktuvuk, from Anaktuvuk to Ambler, and so on.

One time he unexpectedly came upon a trail somewhere in the Brooks Range. He followed it to a cabin and found that a lady was living there by herself while her husband was away for a stretch of wage employment. He said that she talked practically non-stop.

I found that to be true not only in Alaska, but many places in the states. Here's a couple getting along well, with one child, but the woman is very starved for somebody to talk to. I think it's just the same thing.

When you're with somebody who is the primary sharer of your life, you get to the place where there's not a whole lot to talk about. Then, when somebody comes along that has a good ear and they can start talking about themselves and their wants, they're just hungry to do so.

I think that's a very human thing. Alaska provides a situation where it's made worse—and it's not always the women, either. Sometimes it's the men who are starving for somebody to talk to.

For some reason I'm not afflicted that way very much. It's a good thing, because I'm out there by myself so much.

Can you tell me more about stresses on families living in the woods?

There is one thing. Where are the boundaries? When children grow up with adults, they become adults early. They can be trusted to be out and taking care of themselves. Children that have been growing up with other kids don't have that advantage.

I've noticed that even among the Eskimos. They have a tradition of being self-sufficient and so forth, but when the Eskimo kids would come over to play with my kids, mine would seem to have a lot more initiative or ability to go ahead on their own. I don't know why, or if it was just a bias on my part, but I consciously tried to encourage my children to be individuals.

Keith Jones once mentioned that when the Kantners would visit them and Bob and Carrie Uhl at their summer salmon fishing camp at Sisualik, Kole and Seth would go bounding off as soon as they got ashore and go find something to do. But when a boat came across with Eskimo kids who were growing up right in Kotzebue, they'd just stand on the beach, bored.

That rings a bell, alright. In some ways that's kind of tragic. Who knows? I don't.

As far as their culture goes, maybe that interdependence and closeness that they have fills a definite purpose, probably more so in the past than it does now.

The Eskimos had a problem because they didn't teach their children the way we do. The children learn more by watching and by trying to mimic their parents, but the parents don't do a whole lot to teach them. Under those circumstances, maybe that tendency to be a close part of the family or the extended family was something that helped them to learn more than if they were more independent.

I wonder how much of it comes from being in school all the time, where others are constantly providing kids with things to do. The Kantner kids finished their home schooling in a few months during midwinter, when it was dark. They created a lot of their own activities the rest of the year.

Maybe the village kids just don't have a lot of practice in creating their own activities, especially now that there's TV in their homes.

Every once in a while, our kids would get kind of bored. We wouldn't rush in to fill the vacuum—we'd just let them experience that. After a while, they'd find something that interested them.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

