

On the Wings of an Eagle  
St. David's Episcopal Church  
July 25, 2010

When Michael emailed me two months ago, while Paul and I were in Alaska, he suggested that I consider the question "How is God surprising you during your stay in Haines? More surprising than anything that occurred in Alaska, is that I am making this talk, in this place today. I am grateful for your presence with me this morning.

Not surprising, knowing how my life tends to unfold, my story of our journey to Haines began with a dream.

In my dream an eagle swooshed through me as a breath of fresh air. The eagle invited me to fly. As I gained altitude, I realized I could see my life story from a very different perspective.

A week later, the dream was still living with me when my friend Carol Tuynman called. Carol and I have worked in Beaufort, SC on arts integration projects for 10 years. After her parents died, she moved Haines to live on the homestead she inherited.

"Melba" she said "I am so happy here in Haines, it is a great art community. I'd like you to help me start an artist exchange between the two coastal towns. They have a lot in common. I have a job as the cook at Haines Assisted Living. If you will stay here at HAL, I can promise that

you will feast on salmon, halibut, moose and lots of fresh organic vegetables. I know I can get sponsors for you come here as a resident artist.

“What would you want me to do?” I asked.

“Be a story teller” she said.

“Oh, no Carol. I am not a storyteller.

“Yes you are, she insisted, your life and work are a story, we are all storytellers. It’ll be okay. Just bring your sketchbook Journal about the Loggerhead Turtle.”

This is such a wild and beautiful place....you’ll love it!

I googled Haines AK. In the fall, over 3000 bald eagles migrate to Haines to feast on the salmon run. I booked our tickets

Six months later and four hours north of Juneau our ferry churned around a bend. The wind on the deck of the Le Conte was fresh, cold and flushed with the promise of spring. On either side of the Lynn Canal, volcanic ranges extended to a distant infinity. The distinctive rows of white dwellings on Ft. Seward were handsome reminders of

Haines military past. The Tlingits called this place Deishu....end of the Trail.

“Beauty, however, does not make a place an easy place to live” as Haines author Heather Lende observes in her book - IF YOU LIVED HERE I’D KNOW YOUR NAME. This fishing village of less than 3000 people is isolated, cold, cloudy, and expensive. There is limited work and most people have several low paying jobs to make ends meet. Like so much of America, the community is politically split fifty/fifty.

Residents of Haines do not take for granted that they live in a natural theatre of arresting beauty. Moose and bear wander through town, eagles descend in droves to feast on the salmon run, seals lounge in the entrance to the harbor and sea lions bellow from their colony at Sea Lion Rock. The town is crisscrossed with western style storefronts and pre fab buildings. Residents worked to build an award winning library, a beautifully crafted school and an assisted living facility. The Sheldon Museum has a fine collection of historical artifacts. Tall story totems graced public spaces. In the ancient tradition of the Tlingits,

people want to give the gift of beauty to their children, to themselves to their elders and the animals.

Our first night, Carol took us to a Mud Bank beach gathering to honor the life a professor who had passed away. His daughter's friends built campfires and brought such delicacies as smoked hooligan, a tiny oily fish with a crunch. Food was piled onto makeshift plywood tables. Children waded barefoot in freezing puddles then warmed their toes by the fires. From our conversations we learned that if you want to be from Haines, all you have to do is say so.....everyone is from somewhere else. ....unless you are Tlingit, of course. The Tlingits have lived there for 10,000 continuous years.

We settled into our small suite at HAL. Hospice volunteers rotated duty in the room across the hall from us. Vivian, a beloved 90 year old Haines matriarch was dying. Friends came to sing, read and sit with her. In the spacious sunroom her husband, Ray, told stories about their life while spinning long strands of carded wool. Belle, a retired Naval nurse, played cards at the table with Mormon missionaries. Eighty six year old Lucy, checked her crab traps every morning. The TV cabinet stayed shut.. We thought about how we wanted to age.

Lucy and her crew Carl, Jen and their two year old son, Mark, took us wildlife viewing in her tugboat, Whisker III. Eagles, sea lions, seals, whales, and even a mountain goat were enjoying the coming of spring. We pulled traps of Dunganese crabs and spent hours picking them. Carol turned the abundance into delicious crab cakes.

Over the next three weeks Carol organized a dozen different workshop venues. I particularly loved working with the women at the counseling center. In our three weeks together we critiqued each other's work and created journals tailored for their individual purposes. I appreciated the therapist belief in the healing power of art. Influenced by the Sea Lions and Tlingit design, I begin to paint my experience.

Paul and I spent a day at Mosquito Lake School. A rural modern "one room" schoolhouse. Miss Kathy and her assistant teach grades 1-5. Skis and snowshoes lined the hallway. Like the Tlingits who created beautiful toys for their children to learn adult survival skills, Kathy believed that guided play is children's work. The children came in from play to hear my story of the rescue of baby Loggerhead Turtles. There are no turtles in Alaska! They said. There are no sea lions in Beaufort! I said.

Our last Sunday in Haines, the cloudy weather broke clear. We called Drake, an experienced bush pilot. His shiny blue Cessna lifted us over of the valley. Flying above the snow covered rivers of the Glacier Fields my heart was filled with the ecstasy of such majestic beauty and yet a stab of sorrow for the Gulf catastrophe. “For the Beauty of the Earth for the glory of the skies, for the love which from our birth, over and around us lies....” The childhood hymn, arose as a prayer from my heart. The mother earth seemed both so strong and so fragile. I wiped the tears from my cheeks.

“Do people often sob on your plane?” I asked Drake.

He smiled, “I don’t know how people feel, they rarely tell me.” He passed a kleenex.

Flying lower, Drake pointed to the river of ice below. “That is the Muir Glacier” 100 years ago when John Muir was here it was as high as this plane.” Melting cerulean blue pools etched the snow plains below.

Do you want to land on a glacier? Sunday special \$20. You’ll never regret it. We laughed in relief when we landed light as snowflake. Paul and I, newcomers to deep snow, tromped awkwardly about until I

fell backwards. Flapping my arms and legs, I left the imprint of a vigorous snow angel on the top of the planet. Before we took flight, we stood still in the blue/white trance of uninhabited silence. Silence so complete it took me by surprise. A still point that I continue to return to in my memory when I need it.

The following morning, we boarded the Fairweather to Sitka. We were sad to leave the people of Haines. In part, my surprise was the unanticipated experience of living so intimately in a community and being witness to their stories. The stories of people committed to the care of each other.

Though a remote place, Haines is a microcosm of concerns everywhere. This could have been an exchange between Sylva and Haines...and in some ways was. The stories we tell ourselves about family life, education, the care of young and the old, the nature of earth's resources are all aesthetic and moral perspectives that guide our future. In this small interdependent place, people have to sit at the table together. and ask the question "What does it mean to flourish, and how can we do it together?"

Paul and I are grateful for having an opportunity to forge an exchange of artful narratives. We look forward to meeting up with Haines artists in Beaufort this winter along with a surprising story or two.