

Lessons from White Earth by Johannah Bernstein

On May 7-12, a group of individuals travelled with the Tällberg Foundation on a Learning Journey to the Ilulissat Glacier in Greenland. It is now Greenland's fastest moving glacier because of global warming. And we now each have a personal climate change story. From above, little reveals that the Greenland icecap, which covers 80 percent of the island, and which, in many places is more than two kilometres thick, is actually melting at a dangerous pace. The Ilulissat Glacier's calving ice front has retreated 15 km since 2002. The visuals are absolutely stunning. The 56 kilometre-long Ilulissat Icefjord is filled with enormous craggy bergs, some towering over 100 meters high. Occasional pools of jade water are a reminder that the floating ice pack abounds with marine resources that live in a complex but delicate food web.

How ironic that we humans are such geologically potent agents in contrast with the enormity of this magnificent frozen expanse. The Ilulissat Glacier seems untouched and indeed untouchable by humans. But the reality is so paradoxical. Tragically, Greenland and other polar regions are warming at nearly twice the global average rate. NASA satellite monitoring reveals that the icecap is melting faster than previously understood. If as predicted, it does eventually collapse, sea levels will rise to heights that will be catastrophic, swamping every major coastal city around the globe. The Greenland alarm bell should be keeping climate negotiators up at night. Unfortunately, the Greenland ice sheet is not on the agenda of the international climate negotiations. These are being carried out on the basis of outdated science, rather than on the latest evidence, which indicates potentially disastrous tipping points in Earth systems.

We had the opportunity to experience the Greenland ice from air, land and water, providing us each time with a different spatial dimension of the beauty of the

ice. But each time, we were reminded that this is a new landscape that nature had never intended for us to see. For the Inuit, the frozen ice is their lifeblood. Throughout millennia they have demonstrated a remarkable ability to live in harmony with a very hostile physical environment. Adaptation and masterful innovation have made the ice home for the Inuit. But the increasing unreliable ice conditions affect the Inuit's capacity to hunt for food and to sustain their traditional livelihoods. Their survival struggles are now hard evidence of an Earth system that has become far too unstable. Their struggles and lessons are becoming our own. We have much to learn, but so little time. The sobering fact is that whilst the Greenland ice sheet has existed for millennia, the industrialised world has "geo-engineered" the ice sheet's potential rapid fire collapse to unfold in but a century.

Forging a new international climate deal that is grounded in the most authoritative science and principles of equity will require deeper modes of cooperation and new forms of innovation and ingenuity. How ironic that we have come so close to answering the question of whether we humans are alone in the universe, but are moving so very far from being able to sustain the conditions necessary for actually keeping our species alive.

Unfortunately the international community is only negotiating that which is politically viable as opposed to what nature requires and what new science informs. We need therefore a new collective mindset, a deep and radical change of soul and heart, and perhaps a new mental map; one that repositions humanity in a different relationship with the greater Earth community, and which recognises that in the midst of this magnificent diversity of life forms, there is common destiny. We must to return to soul in this landscape of ancient and epic proportions. This is the profound lesson of Inuit wisdom and of White Earth.