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Nobel Conference 55

Ulaakut. Ulaakut, meaning good morning in my language, in Inuktitut language. Ulaakut. I want to first acknowledge and pay respect to the fact that I am speaking on Dakota lands and also to thank President Bergman, Lisa, and everybody else who have been so helpful, and Ursula and the three students, Dan, and Jasmine, and Brittany for taking such good care of me the last couple of days that I have been here, so it's, it's wonderful to be here in front of all of you and to all of the young people that are in the room, as well as the older people like myself.

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Yes, I grew up in Kuujjuaq, a little community, an outpost camp of a Hudson's Bay company, um, and traveled only by dog team the first 10 years of my life. And I learned my second language, which is English, when I was 6 and started school. And those are my humble beginnings before I was sent off to school at a very early age of 10 without my family and parents.

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And so we lived in a very small community where we all helped one another to survive and thrive in a very sustainable way. And so what I want to share with you today is about our communities and who we are and how we've been impacted by the global world. Because, you know, the world has come to know the Arctic for its wildlife more than its people. And often it's because there's large companies sometimes that use the Arctic wildlife to market their products.

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You know, one that you've seen, I'm sure, many times, the polar bear and the seal frolicking around in the, in the, uh, the ice drinking their pop. [laughs] Which is an unlikely partnership because one is lunch. [laughter] So many of these misguided movements, you know, in terms of romanticizing the Arctic and the misguided animal rights movements have really put the protection of wildlife before understanding and respecting the impacts of those movements on its people.

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And so I try my best to teach the world that we are a very remarkable people who live at the top of the world. And so Inuit culture is based on the ice, the snow, and its cold. And its very foundation, in fact, depends on the weather and the climate being cold, freezing cold. And so all living things, including the animals and the Inuit hunting culture really do thrive on that cold. And therefore when the climate changes and it warms, it creates a great imbalance in the cycles of nature, which allows for all living things to be healthy in our world, that cold.

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So the ice and snow and the cold and Arctic for us is all about transportation and mobility. And in the pursuit of healthy, organic country food that we rely on for our health. And so therefore when those kinds of conditions come, because precarious due to the climatic changes, it becomes an issue of safety and security first and foremost. And then our right to culture, our right to educate our children on the land, and the ice and our right to safety. Our right to health. All become impacted and minimized.

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And sometimes we really do need to be reminded. Or if you haven't heard this, we were once the people that were really highly independent. We had our own education systems, our own justice, health systems based on indigenous knowledge and wisdom. And we prepared our young people for the challenges and opportunities of life in a very holistic way. And then things started to happen very quickly. The changes happened quickly. We weren't able to have that full control over our lives. And the stressors began to impact our way of, our well-being on so many levels.

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Because I believe the root of the challenges that we're facing now in the north are the results of those historical traumas from dependencies that are both from the past and ongoing. Dependencies, for example, to substances. You'll hear about that everywhere in the media. To institutions, to processes, which now erode our sense of identity, our sense of self-worth and lessen our ability to really think for and act for ourselves.

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And so these in turn have translated as among, or translated into the monumental health and social challenges that are faced by all of us in our communities today. And they're often misunderstood as our inability to adapt to the modern world. But in reality, that couldn't be further from the truth. We're probably one of the most adaptable people in the world considering the environment that we live in. And so Canadian history, and much of history, is not well known by many of my own fellow Canadians, in fact, and have not served us so well on so many fronts.

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The social, health, and judicial challenges we face today, as I say, are not from yesterday. And there's certainly a context to them and the historical traumas. Many people have not heard about the forced relocations, children that were sent away at a very young age to be educated by strangers. I was one of them at the age of 10. Sexual abuse by those in authority. The collapse of the sustainable ceiling market by emotionally-driven animal rights activists, the dog slaughters that nobody has heard about, the residential schools, to name a few, are some of the major contributing factors into the social and health struggles that we face today.

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And so we do have to understand and put those into context and realize that the substance abuse, the health problems, and the suicides are not the natural state of our people. That's not who we are. They are, rather, a result of the historical traumas, the rapid changes, and the creation of institutional dependencies. But through it all, we've had our land, we've had our predictable environment, and our climate and the wisdom of our elders and our hunters, which helped us to adapt to every situation. However, today things are not so predictable. And I do see the strong connection between health and social well-being, of our communities and our environment and maintaining our Arctic environment are more than just an environmental concern.

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It is an issue of our very right and ability to exist as indigenous people, but precisely, that right is now being challenged and minimized by the new unpredictability of our climate. I was once asked why I spend so much time on environmental issues when there's so many social and health problems in our communities. And my

immediate response was, I don't see a disconnect between any of these issues. They are all interconnected.

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So if hunting continues to decline due to the climatic changes, it means that there's an increase, in fact, in our already too-heavily reliance on expensive, imported goods and food. Where I live and where I lived in Nunavut before for 20 years and now in Nunavik, in my birthplace, things can be two times, if not three times, the cost of food as, for example, in Montreal. And we already know that the switch away from our diet of country food has led to a very dramatic increase in diabetes and childhood obesity, heart disease amongst our people. And as well this reliance on expensive southern imports only deepens our reliance on government support in our communities, which really is the opposite of building thriving local economies that heavily incorporate elements of our traditional culture.

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And so more and more of the much-needed life skills of our youth is lost. In fact, the life and character skills of our youth that is taught on the land are not very well understood. That ice is our university. That's what that ice is for us. Um, a hunting culture, for example, if you're waiting for the snow to fall, the ice to form, the winds to die, the animals to surface, you're being taught patience. This is about you learning, the character building and the life skills. You're learning perseverance, to persevere. Tenacity, to be courageous, to be persistent. How not to be impulsive. One of the things that we have learned in our studies to wonder what is, why the high suicide rates is that impulsivity is one of the things that is something that is contributing to the suicides. It's not to say that you're not in a dark place when you're contemplating taking your life. We are known to have the highest suicide rates in North America. And so we have looked deeply at these issues.

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And so how not to be impulsive. If you're learned on the land, through the land and nature, you are more apt to be able to not be impulsive in the modern-day world. And you're learning how to be bold under pressure, how to withstand stressful situations. How to be focused and meticulous and how to become a natural

conservationist. And ultimately, you're learning how to develop sound judgement and wisdom.

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These are the skills that we want to continue to teach our children because they are very transferable to the modern world and they are taught very traditionally in that cold weather, ice, and snow. And it is, in fact, a necessity, to be able to, in this rapid time of change in our world and trauma, that we need to have those skills be entrenched in our young people today. And these are the same skills that this young generation in this very room will need to become the change agents and the champions of our environment and our planet as we move forward in this together.

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And so remember, it is the stressors of the first wave of these tumultuous changes which we are trying to cope with, which are often not well understood. And we have been grappling with many other issues, not just in terms of environment, but with the depletion of the ozone layer, which causes health challenges, where our hunters have developed cataracts and skin conditions from the higher levels of UV radiation in many numbers.

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And we've had to deal with toxins from far away. The persistent organic pollutants in the 1980s when we discovered that the nursing milk of our mothers and the blood cord was showing to have toxins in our bodies and in the nursing milk of our mothers. That we were being poisoned from afar. And during the UN global negotiations, which I took a very strong lead in, we worked hard to shift this seemingly just a chemical and environmental story to one of human health. It was not an easy task, believe me. And knowing full well the contaminants issue was a difficult fight in putting the human face on the global map.

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When I was still chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council and after a long preparation in December 2005, and with partnerships, in fact, with Americans, with the Center for International Environmental Law in Washington, D.C., and with Earth Justice in,

uh, San Francisco, where my legal teams, we launched and we prepared and launched a legal petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. And I've always said it was not, it was a way of reaching out to Americans because we were targeting at the time the Bush Administration. We thought then that was challenging. [audience laughter] I won't go there. [laughs][applause]

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And so we felt that we were not striking out, but we were reaching out to the Canadian Civil Society to hear what it is because they were already ahead of their government at the time and wanting to help, which is why I had American legal teams with me working very hard on this. But I, along with 62 fellow Inuit signatories from Canada and Alaska launched the pioneering work on linking climate change to human rights. And although in the end the commission chose not to go forward with the petition, for various reasons, which I won't get into today, but there's more detail in the book, *The Right To Be Cold*. There was a historical hearing to educate them on the legal impacts between climate change and human rights.

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But on the outgrowth of the petition, I believe, have made way for others to be courageous. And I believe that we did change the discourse on the issue of it not just being an economic issue or a political issue or a scientific issue but one of the human issue, human dimension and human rights.

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And so I think the outgrowth did help in that way. And there were other people that were able to then move forward. And to this day there's still movement to go in the direction of humans rights justice, eco-justice.

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In the rumble, trumble of national and international politics. We heard a little bit about that yesterday with the work that our scientists do. The language of economics and technology will always call for further delay in great certainly. And moreover, just focusing on the economics and the politics of the issue tends to silo,

or separate, these issues from one another as opposed to recognizing these strong connections between rights, environment, health, economies and society.

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And so framing our stories, I believe, in terms of the connections between fundamental human rights, including the right to health and environmental change refocuses the debate on humanity and not just deficiency. I think we must remember that the doctrine of collective human rights unites our indigenous world to diverse cultures, peoples, countries all around the world. And I think this important understanding of our collective connection as a shared humanity can spur decision makers to act in a way that no dry technical report ever can.

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And so ultimately addressing environmental degradation of indigenous lands, including climate change and the language of human rights, and building human rights protections into our global climate agreements are more than just strategic choices. They are ethical imperatives that demand the world we take a principled path and courageously reconnect to solve these monumental challenges that we're faced with.

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So now here we are, the Arctic is an area of utmost importance in the minds of global policymakers, economic decision makers and researchers but this interest needs to be better informed by awareness of what is happening to the largely indigenous and subsistence-oriented communities that provide that human face to the Arctic.

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Many of our communities are small, smaller than this room, definitely. My community is about twenty-seven, twenty eight hundred people. And they don't necessarily have great political power or influence at the national and international levels. But they are the heart and soul of the Arctic. It's very difficult to put ourselves on that map. And I was sharing with the students yesterday afternoon a disappointing e-mail I received where I was asked by the New York Times to do an op-ed piece, an opinion piece, editorial. And they came to me and I worked very hard on getting that in because they said they wanted to have it out this week

during the summit in New York. Only to hear yesterday that the editorial board decided not to choose my editorial to go into that piece this week.

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And so we just have to keep plugging away and keep trying and trying to get those voices heard from the Arctic. And from indigenous peoples who have ways in which we want to contribute. We don't want just to be the victims to what is happening in our world.

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So in Inuit culture, as I say, every challenging moment was an opportunity for teaching our children how to become those proficient providers. But, again, as I say, and I said earlier, by developing their skills in a very holistic manner. And it's because technical skills of how to harvest that animal to bring it home to your family is one thing. But the characters, and that's how the world works, but the character skills are about how you work. And that is important. As young people, this holistic approach to learning is the hallmark of Inuit culture. I have a mosquito going around me here. [laughs] Maybe followed me don't from the Arctic. [laughter] We have lots of them.

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This wisdom, which is often sourced from the ice and snow and the cold is equally now at stake in being lost as the ice itself. So it's not just about the ice and the polar bears. And I want to say that very strongly here. It is about our children, our families, our communities. Our environment and climate were predictable and very rich in lessons, allowing our ingenious culture, through traditional knowledge to be passed down generation to generation.

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One has to remember, we are the inventors of the qajaq, which is that boat that has been engineered and replicated throughout the world. We engineered that. We are the people who can build a home of snow warm enough and be joyful like this man you see in the cold. That's who we are. If there's ingenuity at play here, we can read conditions like nobody's business and we can not only just survive but thrive in this kind of cold.



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However, again, as I say, things are no longer predictable, and this traditional knowledge can no longer often be counted upon. Everything is changing and changing rapidly. Globalization has hit the Arctic and its people, impacting our health, our cultural way of life, our environment and our climate. And as that ice melts, the wisdom that has taught us over the millennia now threatens to disappear along with that ice.

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Everything is connected through our common atmosphere, not to mention our common spirit and our humanity. What affects another affects us all. And as the Arctic melts, other places such as these small island developing states are sinking, as well as many other places. I heard about the highway here on my way here where this's some water rising up onto your highway at certain periods of the year. It's happening everywhere now.

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The Arctic is that cooling system. It is the air conditioner, if you will. As it melts, other places are being impacted whether it be the droughts, the floods, the tornadoes or the intense hurricanes from farmers in Australia to the fishermen in the Gulf of Mexico to the home owners of New Orleans and Oklahoma, the devastation escalates and we are all connected.

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The world I know and the world my grandsons would inherit is changing very rapidly. I have two grandsons. One is 22, one is 6. Climate change in the Arctic is not just an environmental issue with unwelcomed economic consequences. It is a matter of health. Again, I say, livelihood, food, individual and cultural survival. It is a human health issue affecting our families.

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The Arctic is not wilderness or a frontier waiting to once again be exploited. It is our home, it is our homeland. And all of these challenges that we're facing are not necessarily of our doing. We have benefited the least from industry and yet we are the disproportionately negatively impacted by the impacts of globalization. How

ironic and said that a people who have lived sustainably for millennia and far from the sources of these pollutants and greenhouse gasses would bear the brunt of their damaging effects. For too long we have asked the world, stop bringing harm to a way of life that is important to us and the world has responded often by saying, it is too expensive for us to stop bringing harm to your way of life. And we, the Inuit, have paid the price for the unsustainable choices most of the world continues to want to maintain. And we Inuit are becoming the collateral damage of the result of irresponsible political actions, or should I say inactions? Everyone benefits from a frozen Arctic and that everything is connected and that we can no longer separate the importance and the value of the Arctic from the sustainable growth of economies around the world.

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I believe it's through the power of human rights-based approach that we can move this discussion out of the realm of a dry economic and technical debate that too often overtakes the discussion on so many levels. A human rights approach takes the path of principle, showing us that fundamental change is not just sound policy but an ethical imperative.

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And I've seen this approach, the power of this approach, at work in my global work as we drew out for the first time the lengths between Arctic climate change and our environment, cultural and human rights. And I saw how the world enthusiastically connected and welcomed our work. Why is that? Because I believe that people can relate to this issue when you bring it down to the human dimension.

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And so defending the Inuit *Right To Be Cold*, another plug. Got to do this, you know. You're a large crowd. [laughter] Depending the Inuit right to be cold is really about connectivity. That's what about. And that we're all very connected by this fundamental human right. It is about a healthy environment for all of us. And I have always said, if you protect the Arctic, you save the planet. That's the connection there.

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So that right, which a right that requires the world to focus on and care in defending at all levels, whether they be regional, national, or international. And so when I did start to write the book and felt I had a responsibility to write that work and share it with the world and share it with my people first and foremost. I have been honored, very honored, and I have been very humbled by the fact that I have been hugely decorated for the work that I have done over the last 20 years. And I really am humbled and honored by that.

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But most people have not really fully understood my story and so to take a line from the great Maya Angelou who said, 'Everyone knows my glory, but they don't know my story,' I felt it was important to share. And so as I say, we lived a very close-knit family, where everything mattered and everything was connected and that was kind of magic in my childhood. And so that's why I bring to you those kinds of storytelling that connect to the larger pictures and connect to the issues that we're dealing with and so challenged with. And so it's to show you the human face to all of these issues because for us hunting is not a sport. Along with the technical skills, as I say, we are really teaching our children to be able to combat what is coming at us and what has been coming at us and what is now here and arrived with the challenges. Because we're already dealing with those kinds of situations with climate change and it's already a very vulnerable state that we're living in. I'm not suggesting that it's all sadness and gloom. It's not. We have some remarkable youth that are standing up. We have filmmakers and performing artists, singers and songwriters that are out there that are really starting to make the movement strong in terms of addressing the issues and taking back some of that control that we so need to take.

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And so for that, I've learned through the many talks, though, even with all of that, that very few people know about the historical traumas and putting them into context and it is an important piece, not only for or youth. Because I felt that our youth didn't know enough about what happened and why did we struggle so much. And if I could help to alleviate even a little bit of that burden that that generation carry in understanding the context and not taking things so personally, as hard as that is, I wanted to be able to contribute in that way, with that understanding

because we had the forced relocations of the families in the high Arctic in the name of sovereignty. The collapse of the seal skin market where they stripped the dignity of our hunters. Children were separated, as I say, and I was one of them.

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So the cultural suppression and oppression has diminished our identity. Addictions and violence are symptoms of those traumas that have been endured. In fact, the first suicide in my community is when I was 18, so it's a new phenomena. And here we are still reeling from those first waves of changes and trauma. And finally coming to recognize the root of the breakdown of our society, only to realize another wave of tumultuous change is upon us. Because when climatic changes start to impact the Arctic ice, making it precarious, it brings on even more stressors in an already stressed situation.

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The ice is a big part of our identity. It is our highways. It is our life force. It is something we knew to be as permanent as your rivers and your mountains. No one has, and one has to remember that the ice, again, as I said earlier, is about transportation and mobility and when that becomes precarious, it immediately becomes an issue of safety and security. My grandson, when he was a young man hunting with his father, his, the picture here.

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So the climatic changes have only added more stress and anxiety to a community with a historical context of trauma. We see outpouring of support and generosity when things are happening now, certainly in my country and we see it in yours through the news, with the outpouring of generosity and support by first responders and neighbors and others when there's floods, when there's fires, all of those things that happen.

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But imagine the equivalent level of emergency every single day without end where you feel that loss of what is happening all around you. Imagine no drinking water, not for a week or two or for decades. Imagine being poisoned from afar in the 80s when our Inuit women had to think twice about nursing their babies. Imagine

women in your community going missing with no explanation for decades. The constant worry of your children who are high risk for self-destruction due to the intergenerational traumas and the structural racism of our institutions which make you feel less than what you are meant to be.

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What if a constant state of emergency became the new norm? What kind of psychological impact might that have on your people in your community? A history of this violence of our communities mirrors now the violence we are inflicting upon our planet. If there's anything that you take away today, I want you to understand that human trauma and planet trauma are one of the same.

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I understand the economy's volatile and that growing the economy in the same unsustainable way causes irreparable damage to the atmosphere and it's forcing the planet to react with violent storms and other erratic events. This is not unlike the child who has suffered trauma. Without care, a space to heal, and effective coping mechanisms, self-destructive behavior is inevitable. What we are seeing in our communities and in our atmosphere are not abnormal behaviors. What we are seeing are perfectly normal reactions to extremely abnormal circumstances.

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And I say, again, human trauma and planet trauma are one of the same. So here we are. I don't think we can think our way out of our crisis. I think we've tried lots of politicking, economy, economic solutions, technology. A lot of it hasn't work. I think we need to reassure society that change will not punish economy but rather provide an opportunity to flourish in the future, creating a better world.

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And I think we talk a lot of about reconciliation with indigenous peoples in Canada. If we truly want to reconcile as citizens of the world, we have to feel our way through this crisis. We have to reconnect with everything and reconnect with one another, with nature, and with the indigenous peoples who so want to contribute to the solutions.

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I think if we solve the problems that we face in the indigenous communities, we will solve the climate crisis. I think we will solve the economic crisis if we can do this right. I was, as I gear towards finishing, I was in Australia a couple of years ago after my book was out. Three authors from Canada were chosen to go down to book festivals. And there I had a chance to meet Tim Flannery, one of the world's greatest climatologist from Australia, but we were in New Zealand at the time. And we were on a panel. And an audience member at the end asked him, 'What is it that is lacking in this world of ours when we know the science is in, and we know it's collaborated by those on the ground who are most impacted by it? What is it that is preventing us? What is it that we don't have that seems to be lacking in taking action and moving forward with this?' And his, um, response was similar to what Dr. Ghosh was talking about yesterday. And his response was, 'Imagination. Imaging that we could do this differently. Imagining that we could make a new world with new ideas, innovative ways.' And so imagine we must, as the younger generation that is here, to imagine.

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And it's not just about imagining and hope with empty words but with action. To imagine that we can have a world that can be sustainable and healthy, not just for the indigenous peoples who are most impacted, not just for the Artic, but for all of us.

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And so I went to end you saying something on leadership that I was asked when I was teaching as a visiting scholar at Boden College in Maine back in 2009. I was away from home for that year and, but we were having a women's conference, Inuit women's conference in Iqaluit where I was living for 20 years, in Nunavut, in the higher Artic than where I live now in my birthplace. And they said, we know you're away but we really want your voice to come into this conference that we're holding for Inuit women in Iqaluit where I've lived and my home was still there.

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And they said, but you can be taped while you're down there on video and then we'll show the video in the room. And they said, 'But we have a specific question for you that you can say whatever you want but we have a specific question that

we'd like you to answer on leadership.' And so I asked, you know, I, we went around and we found the right videographer and so on. And here I was amongst the big trees on camps at Boden College signaling this message out to treeless Nunavut. So it was quite an experience. But the question was what does leadership mean to me? 'What does leadership mean to you?' they asked. And so this is what I said.

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Leadership to me means to never lose sight of the fact that the issues at hand are much bigger than oneself. Leadership is about working from a principled and ethical place within oneself and it is to model authentically, genuinely for others, a sense of calm, a sense of clarity, and a sense of focus. Leadership is to always check inward. To insure one is leading from a position of strength, not fear or victimhood so one does not project one's own limitations onto those you are modeling possibilities for. So I end with that and I thank you for having me here. Nakurmiik. Thank you. [applause]