

Melting the Ice in the Human Heart

We can't undo what we've done to the planet, but perhaps we can ask its forgiveness.

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How close, how intimate, have you ever gotten with Greenland?

A [new documentary](#) called *Stella Polaris*, directed by Yatri Niehaus — part of Chicago's tenth annual [Peace on Earth Film Festival](#) — takes you on a meditative journey to this lonely, extraordinary island, to its melting ice, its rampaging waters and crumbling glaciers, where climate change is a part of daily life, and where the native people have wisdom and heart to offer the rest of us.

It begins with a slow meditation on the beauty of the ice. Then, six minutes in, a wall of ice suddenly crashes into the ocean.

"The Old People of Greenland have told us, since the sixties, this time it's too late to stop it," a native man says. ". . . Your religion, your money and your politics cannot stop the melting of the Big Ice."

But the story is told matter-of-factly, mostly without rancor or blame. Indeed, it's not really a story in the ordinary sense. It's a slow walk across the ice: a swirl of light and sky, ice and ocean, in loving close-up and stunning overview.

Punctuating the photography are the words of an array of Greenland natives, who talk about life here at the far end of Planet Earth — life that's "ordinary" and Western in some ways, but that reverberates with memories of the old ways and the Old People.

"From clothes to food, we had everything we could ever ask to have," a man named Angaangaq says at one point. "Then the government came and declared that the village of Qaggat, my grandmother's village, is very poor. There was no money in the village. It didn't have a store. So the government closed the village and moved my grandmother to Maniitsoq."

As he talks, the camera pans over a sterile, soulless, "modern" building, presumably in the new, money-infused town the Danish government had established.

"My grandmother died in 1969," he continues. "We all say now she died of a broken spirit. She was moved from the village she grew up in, where she was the matriarch of an entire society — honored, recognized, respected, acknowledged, loved — to a senior home where she was nobody."

And then the camera pans to the melting ice.

“Only by melting ice in the heart of Man does Man have a chance to change and begin using his knowledge wisely.”

And slowly a truth emerges, that peace on Earth, whatever that is, involves listening to the Old People: the indigenous people, the victims of cultural, spiritual and physical genocide these last 500 years. They had a connection to the planet that their conquerors dismissed as primitive and irrelevant. *Stella Polaris* makes this point not with venom but with melting ice, which in close-up cuts through one’s consciousness like tears.

This movie is merely one of 34 international films, from 11 different countries, that are part of this year’s Peace on Earth Film Festival, which will be held March 9-11 at Chicago’s Davis Theater. Besides the films, the festival also includes Q&A sessions with some of the directors, plus both filmmakers’ and peacemakers’ panel discussions.

The mission of the festival, which I have been lucky enough to be a part of since its inception, in 2008, is “to raise awareness of peace, nonviolence, social justice and an eco-balanced world.”

It “aims to contribute to a culture of peace through international cinema, dialogue and programming highlighting individuals on the vanguard of peace activism and social change. POEFF endeavors to enlighten and empower individuals, families, and communities to step out of the ignorance of conflict, violence and divisiveness, into the light of communication, consideration, tolerance and understanding.”

Step out of the ignorance of conflict . . .

This is an idea that bears close attention. Is it possible? What does it mean? At one point in *Stella Polaris*, a woman named Laali, a Greenland native who became a social worker and lived for a dozen years in Northern Canada, said:

“I was working with the First Nation, the Inuit and the Metis women, who were abused or homeless. . . .The native people really use their culture, their teachings to lift up the spirits of the women, the teenagers, the children who are in need. They use their elders. They sit in circles with them. . . .”

The film doesn’t explore this further, but the point here is profound: It is the essence of stepping out of the ignorance of conflict. The peace circle/Restorative Justice movement has entered the so-called civilized world from Northern Canada and other parts of the world where indigenous culture has not been totally uprooted.

Sitting in a circle with others — creating a safe place where everyone is respected, everyone is welcome, everyone can speak — builds connection and creates the possibility of healing. As [Rupert Ross](#) writes:

“Healing is by turns subtle and dramatic, but underlying the entire process is this movement toward reconnection. . . .

“As the First Principle in The Sacred Tree is phrased: ‘It is . . . possible to understand something only if we can understand how it is connected to everything else.’”

And I return to the ice, the ocean and the sky. *Stella Polaris* is not so much a movie to understand as a movie to surrender to. We can't undo what we've done to the planet, but perhaps we can ask its forgiveness.

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Featured image is a screenshot/stella-polaris.org/film.

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