

## Thoughts of Niilo Koponen

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In 1971 and 72 I spent six months studying wolf behavior and physiology at the Naval Arctic Research Laboratory in Barrow, Alaska. On my way south I was introduced to wildlife artist Bill Berry in order to improve my research sketches of wolves for thermoregulatory behavior. As the instruction was going along Bill stopped almost in mid-sentence and said you need to meet Niilo and it is Sunday evening. I was told that Niilo had had a wolf hybrid and that he could talk to me about the animal's behavior while we took a sauna.

The next few hours were an amazing collection of insights, tastes, smells, sensations, and experiences. During it all I learned that Niilo was a Quaker. I had just become a Convinced Friend a few months earlier back in Pennsylvania and had looked at becoming a Conscientious Objector during the Vietnam Conflict. Niilo and I made some heartfelt connections during the sauna that night.

A year passed before I again met Niilo. It was the summer of 1973 and it was at the homestead of Mahala Ashley Dickerson in Wasilla. It was a statewide Quaker retreat. The conversation centered on her desire that for years she had wanted to turn her 160 acre homestead into a Peace Training Center. Niilo was ready to start building that weekend, albeit there were no materials or plans, he was set to walk the property and look at sites. Mahala took the enthusiasm to heart and over the coming months made legal arrangements to turn 10 acres over to the Friends for a cemetery and site for a meetinghouse. A Peace Training Center needed to start with a meetinghouse. Later that year I had to return to Pennsylvania for family reasons. Before leaving I piled up some lumber I had collected and told Mahala that it was for the new meetinghouse.

The next time I saw Niilo was in 1979, six years later. I was living in Barrow and heading to a Quaker retreat at Mahala's. I flew into Fairbanks and went to Niilo's home. There was Bill Berry and we had a great reunion and another sauna. Unfortunately Bill died just a few days later. Meanwhile I had taken the train the next day to Wasilla. Niilo came down later. There was another discussion of the Peace Training Center. It was agreed to start building the meetinghouse.

Niilo took the lead and I am sure used his experiences in Finland and from his own homestead buildings. Materials began to be collected. Plans made, and tools gathered. In the late summer of 1981 the new Friend's Meetinghouse in Wasilla was completed. I was so very pleased with all of Niilo's efforts to make this decades' old dream a reality. I was particularly honored when the very first meeting for worship that was held in the Meetinghouse was on 19 September 1981 and was the marriage under the care of the Anchorage Friends Meeting of

Vicki Sanders and I. Niilo was unfortunately not able to attend that meeting and celebration.

Seven more years passed. It is now 1988. I was working for the Alaska Health Project addressing occupational and environmental safety and health issues. Most of the work focused on organized labor groups. We were contacted by a group of widows who through conversations realized that their husbands had all died of pancreatic cancer. They thought the cause was working on Amchitka Island preparing for nuclear warhead testing. These were all workers who did hard-rock excavation and were regularly around many hazardous materials.

I talked with Niilo about his efforts on a Nuclear Free Arctic. Greenpeace, which got its start attempting to stop the 1971 Amchitka nuclear test, was taking a new look at what may be happening on the island as they suspected it was leaking radiation into the Bering Sea. We ended up working together as new information about the nuclear tests was being released. With Niilo's mentorship and insights an argument was put together that the Alaska Workers' Compensation cases should be reopened after their regular statute of limitations had expired, as new information that could have bearing on health was now available. I was called as an expert witness and in the end the State Department of Labor agreed to reopen the cases.

Within a year a Class Action Suit was brought, the Alaska Department of Labor took it to the Federal Department of Labor and the Department of Energy. An out of court settlement was reached. It stated that the Local Laborer's Union would be supported to establish an Amchitka Medical Screening program for any worker, Union or not, who could document being on the island during the times of the three nuclear tests. If any such person could then document that he or she was suffering from anyone of 23 types of radiation related cancers, medical compensation would be made.

As of today the program has expanded to be the Building Trades National Medical Screening Program covering all workers from 27 Department of Energy facilities from around the nation. In Alaska alone, over \$32,000,000 in compensation has been made to workers. This settlement unfortunately did not cover those who had died before the program was established, albeit was founded on the knowledge of their untimely deaths.

Shortly after this work was in motion, Governor Hickel appointed me to the State's Emergency Response Commission. Niilo had encouraged me to be an Emergency Medical Technician and Volunteer Fire Department member while I lived in Barrow. I have always thought that Niilo also recommended my appointment to the Commission. One of the major publications we prepared was "Radiological Threats and Release Response Preparedness in the State of Alaska" in March 1993.

## Niilo Koponen Memorial - Hild

Niilo also supported me in attending a Keystone workshop on leadership. I do believe he was urging me to become more politically engaged. About that time I was elected as President of the American Society for Circumpolar Health. A short time later I was invited to speak on the health impacts of environmental contaminants at an international meeting in Iceland. Within months I became the Key National Contact for Health of the eight-nation Arctic Environmental Protection Strategy. Through the work of the Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Program the US began to sample human tissues for contaminants. These endeavors evolved into the 1996 formation of the eight-nation Arctic Council. The data collected during these programs contributed to the preparation of the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants to eliminate the 12 worst offending chemicals. On May 23, 2001 the US joined 90 nations in signing that Convention.

As I look at my professional career, I am most proud of the legacy of the Building Trades Medical Screening Program and Stockholm Convention. For both of these I feel as if I had Niilo's hand on my back offering that confidence and nudge to keep going forward no matter the size of the obstacles or breadth of the opposition.

Niilo was a friend, a Friend, mentor, and catalyst. He was informed. He had vision. He was encouraging and supportive. He was motivational. He lived the practice of caring for one's community and being mindful of the good of all. God bless him.