

Lessons from the North: What John J. Scheuren Learned from the Inuit

A civil engineer's reflections from Greenland and Canada's Eastern Arctic.

During his years working in Greenland and the Canadian Arctic, civil engineer John J. Scheuren, Jr. (1909–1995) discovered that some of his most enduring lessons came not from engineering, but from the Inuit people whose knowledge, resilience, and humanity shaped life in the North. His observations, preserved in *Talking Through My Hard Hat*, reveal a perceptive man whose interests extended well beyond construction projects.

On Raising Children

"I found out that the Inuit never beat their children. They train them by kind words, sometimes with a little teasing or lampooning.... Inuit children are amazingly well behaved. Their education is based on the principle that a child given its own way will learn by practical experience what is bad and will without much coercion choose the good. As a result, Inuit children are usually very independent and full of self-confidence." — p. 194

"Inuit parents do not approve of striking a child because then the child will feel ugly, and he will want to strike someone else." — p. 194

On Peace and Human Nature

"It is said by some that violence is born amongst groups who are deprived and forced to live in terrible surroundings. This may be true of the people who live in slums, but with the Inuit who live in hard conditions, very hard conditions, they are non-violent toward other people." — p. 192

"Life is hard, yet they contradict the scientists who say that it is not in the genes of Homo sapiens to be aggressive and make war and be violent, and it is said this is true, that aggression is caused by the leaders forcing their subjects to war." — p. 191

On Trust

"They do not steal; they respect caches; they have no political bosses; they respect the best hunters but live in family groups, and no orders are even given. They cannot lie, and they will not give their word lightly." — p. 192

A Moment Remembered

One of John's memories captured the humor and communal responsibility he encountered in the North. *"As I stood holding two young children while their parents flew toward the Greenland ice cap, an old Inuit smiled and said, 'If they do not return, you'll have to take care of those children.'" — p. 167*

Final Reflection

"...when one considers the inability of the Inuit to lie or steal, as well as to be unable to understand why men would gather in groups to make war, I believe we should devoutly wish we could all be like the Inuit." — p. 168

Excerpted from *Talking Through My Hard Hat: Chronicle of a 20th Century Civil Engineer*
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