

## Not Just A Pile of Stones

By Freddi Dogterom



Canada's Arctic is a very beautiful but potentially dangerous place to live. There are many dangers, but getting lost "out on the land", out on the bare Tundra is probably the most feared. A person could wander for days and days until either a predator or exhaustion killed them. The land is flat, and goes on forever; there are no trees, no landmarks, and no familiar sights. A compass won't work because of the magnetic North Pole, and there are no roads and no road maps. You are surrounded by the sounds of silence.

I lived in the Arctic – 350 miles north of the Arctic Circle for nearly 6 years, and it was there that I met a remarkable Inuit woman. Her name was Ida and she became a cherished friend. She was very shy, but a delightful soul and it was Ida that taught me about Inukshuk's.

An Inukshuk is a pile of stones. It is not just any old random pile of stones, it is special. In an Inukshuk each stone is very carefully selected and placed into a particular order to communicate a specific message. In one style the stones are piled up to resemble a human form. On this barren landscape with no natural landmarks, the Inuit people would build these stone figures. Out on the land – they would look for these stone figures and then they would know they were on the right path, that people had passed this way before. The word Inukshuk means "Stone man who points the way." A stone figure on the horizon was a welcome sight indeed.

My friend Ida taught me how to work with leather and to make beaded moccasins and mukluks – but most importantly she taught me how to build an Inukshuk.

"Pick your stones carefully", she would admonish me. "Don't just go for the pretty ones. You need different shapes; you need strong ones and small ones, stones for support and stones that will fit in". Together we built many, many stone figures, with Ida gently teaching me all the while. Each figure was different, and soon they were no longer just piles of stones – they became like real people to me. Some were big, some were small, some were sturdy and some fell over and tripped me, but each one was very, very special. Ida taught me that each stone had its special place but it was the one that went on top that was the most important. This top stone was the head stone. It couldn't be too big or too small so that from a distance the figure would look like a stone man. She said that this stone showed the spirit of the figure.

When the time came for me to leave the Arctic, Ida my dear friend came to offer me a final gift. She knew I didn't need any more fur pillows or fancy slippers, but as a true friend she gave me a piece of herself. With tears in her eyes she came to say goodbye and offer one final lesson.

"Build yourself a new Inukshuk, but build it with your new friends. Just like picking the rocks – select each friend with care. Pick them like special stones.

Pick some for strength; some for support, some to fill in and some to provide directions. Build a new Inukshuk with new friends in you new life. It will guide you and give you good direction.”

It was difficult to move 4000 miles south to a new city, a new job. In my first home I built a real Inukshuk out of stones and set it in my garden. As I lovingly gathered the rocks and piled them up the loneliness would be pushed back as I imagined my friend Ida working alongside me. But, the neighborhood children pushed my fine stone figure over and stole some of the rocks. I was heartbroken.

Gradually, I started to realize that Ida’s final gift was truly a gift from the heart. I was not to build a stone man – I was to build a figure of friends. She was right! I needed to select special people to become the rocks upon which to build my new life.

This I started to do. I selected a rock from among my neighbors, the wonderful lady who welcomed me with open arms and a full coffee pot. I selected another rock from among my new coworkers. Most had not been very warm, but a special few were delightful, so I placed these friends in positions of strength and solidity. I picked from among my social friends and my business friends, and following Ida’s advice I placed each one with care. I chose friends from within my family to represent the arms reaching out. Friends from the past, friends from the future they were all there. Being mindful of Ida’s advice I took great care to select the friend to represent the head stone - the stone that showed the spirit.

As humans, each of us has a spiritual need to be filled. We may use different language to refer to that need. Some may choose to call it a higher power, some may call it “the man upstairs” and some, like me, may choose to call it God. This is the special stone, the friend that I chose to top my Inukshuk.

I will never see my friend Ida again; she died a short time after I left the arctic. But, she gave me the greatest gift a human could. She gave me the gift of friendship. She gave me the gift of building a life of friends. By placing each friend with care I have built an Inukshuk of friends from every part of my life.

Each of you woke up today with a pile of stones. What are you going to do with them? You all have friends. Some are big, some are small, some are pretty, and some are strong. You can select special friends and build an Inukshuk or you can leave them as a random pile of stones. My challenge to you is to build on them. Let your friends be your guiding figure. Select them with love. Pile them with care. Create a figure you will be proud of. And remember – the head stone. This is the most important stone of all. From near or from far it will show your character. Select it with care and your Inukshuk of friends truly will point a way in the wilderness.

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