

**THE HEART OF THE HALIBUT: A Rite of Passage of an Aleut Boy**  
**By Larry Merculieff**

I knew the halibut on my hand-line was very large, probably over five and a half feet long. It must weight over 180 pounds. It was undoubtedly a female I thought to myself as I carefully maintained a steady pressure on the cotton line, using every part of my body to hoist her to the surface. I could feel that she was hooked by the lip and likely to come off the line if I was not present in the moment with its energy and every movement, however subtle.

Halibut are one of the strongest fish in the Bering Sea, known to fight so fiercely that inexperienced people would get hurt once the fish is on board the small 14 to 22 foot craft we Aleuts typically use around St. Paul Island, my home in the Pribilofs. Inexperienced fishers usually let the halibut fight after it is brought onboard the boat before subduing it. "Respect the sea and the halibut," we would always hear as children, "otherwise you can hurt yourself". Self-responsibility, awareness, and respect were only a few of the many life lessons taught to us by the halibut and the Bering Sea. If you get hurt, it is not the fault of the halibut, the sea, or the weather-it is one's own doing.

I took my time as I hoisted the large female halibut up from 150 feet off the rocky sea bottom, one-quarter mile offshore and eleven miles from the village. *If she wants to fight, go with her energy, don't fight back. Honor her life force and she will know to give herself to you...*the wisdom and lessons given to me by my Elders were guiding me now. I knew that if the large halibut turned her head downwards she will have more physical power through momentum than either I or the cotton line could manage, so I must maintain a steady pressure on the line. Any hesitation in my efforts and the halibut would know it instantly, causing her to swiftly turn downwards, perhaps ripping the hook out of her mouth or breaking the fishing line. I could feel her energy. This was a powerful, wise, and old, halibut. She knew to conserve her energy until an opportunity to escape presented itself, or for the last death struggle. She did not fight on her way up; it was her way of acknowledging my skill. As the halibut came into view, my partner, n her very first halibut fishing trip, gasped in astonishment at the size of the fish. I knew I would need another person besides myself to gaff the halibut, so I instructed her on how to gaff while I continued to slowly bring the halibut to the surface.

*Do not let the nose of the halibut hit the air before you are ready to gaff, otherwise it will start fighting,* my inner voice of generations stated. I had caught this fish adjacent to a rip tide area filled with large rocks, so I had to watch the speed and direction of our drift while bringing up the halibut. The rip tide zones can cause a boat to drift a half-mile in ten minutes, and the direction of drift can reverse in the same amount of time. I had to be aware in the moment regardless of what else was going on.

Finally, the halibut was to the surface, I could see that she was a five and a half foot female, as I had felt when she first struck the line, and she was hooked only by the lip. One misdirected gaff movement and she would rip the hook out of her mouth and be

gone. Before I could gaff the large halibut, the boat rocked to the swells caused by the riptides, causing the halibut's nose to lift into the air. She immediately arched her muscular back and powerfully thrashed her tail in the air, heading back down to the bottom. I let the line go but kept a slight pressure on the line. I had to be completely one with the halibut if I was not to lose her. I had to know her intentions before she acted on them. Too much pressure on the line and she would be gone. Too little pressure on the line and she would be gone. It had to be precise, and I had to know exactly when the halibut was about to reach the bottom in order to turn her back upwards with her own momentum. To bring her back under my own muscle would ensure that the halibut would be lost. Today people might call this Zen fishing, but for me, it was the way of the Aleut.

I felt her beginning to turn and I gently increased the pressure on my line, bringing her head back up, and continued hauling again. There was no struggle, only weight. She was conserving her energy for when we would face each other again.

I was going through a ritual my Aleut ancestors undoubtedly experienced over the ten thousand years of our intimate relationship with the Bering Sea. Taking a halibut in the proper way is a ritual, and mastering this ritual is a rite of passage into adolescence and ultimately into manhood, and it was part of an experience that connected me directly with my ancestors. My ancestors felt the energy of the halibut just as I did. They loved the Bering Sea just as I did. Their emotions were no doubt the same as what I was experiencing with a halibut on the handline. Prior to the invention of the cotton line, my ancestors used strong lengths of kelp for their hand-lines. The smell, taste, and feel of this wondrous place in the middle of the Bering Sea were the same as what my ancestors experienced. This Sea is my experiential history book and a personal link to my ancestors.

Historically, our seafaring technology was the most sophisticated of any North American culture when the Russians found and enslaved us. Our people had traveled in high seas kayaks to places as distant as Southern California, the Pacific Islands, and the coast of Japan. Our craft were known to be the best open water kayaks in the world. Having built a traditional Aleut kayak, I learned that its sophistication is based on the superior ability of the kayak to move with every nuance of the Sea, from the most overt to the most subtle. Aleut kayaks were known to have the first "ball bearings" in any sea craft known in North America. These ball bearings allowed the craft to move as the sea moves. To construct such craft required a profound understanding of the Bering Sea, an understanding that remained relatively intact to this day, despite the genocide and severe cultural disruption Aleuts experienced for more than two hundred years. It was the very same kind of understanding I was using to connect with the halibut on my line. Like the kayak to the Sea, I had to intimately connect with the halibut in order to feel her every nuance and intention, in order to succeed in bringing her on board. This connection is the foundation for what is often termed by native peoples as our Traditional Knowledge and Wisdom.

As I hoisted the large female halibut towards the surface, my thoughts transported me to the beginning of what brought me to this point. At five years of age, I was introduced to the seafaring ways of my ancestors. This rite of passage began with a group of children clustered around a man, known in the village as “Old Man”, cutting halibut on the emerald green grass next to his home one summer on St. Paul Island in the Pribilofs. He had just come back from a fishing excursion with a load of halibut caught from a 14 foot New England style double-ended dory powered by a 10 horse outboard motor. The halibut would be used to feed the Elders, widows, and disabled first, then his extended family, and finally his own immediate family.

I was part of the group of children who watched with fascination and wonder as Old Man skillfully and carefully cut the halibut into special parts that filled specific kinds of meals—soup bone cuts, steak cuts, fish pie cuts. More fascinating for me was to see what was in the halibut’s stomach—sandlance, octopus, and small king, tanner, and horsehair crab.

Suddenly, Old Man, bronzed from windburn that resulted from the day’s outing, cut the halibut’s heart out and held it out to us, moving around inside the circle of children.

“Whoever will eat this halibut heart raw will always catch as much halibut as you will ever need whenever you go fishing,” he proclaimed.

We all stepped back, startled by this gesture.

Then, without thinking, I said, “I’ll eat it!”

Unbeknownst to me at the time, this was an old Aleut tradition to determine who was ready to go to sea to fish for halibut. Aleut wisdom taught that whoever would have enough courage to eat a raw halibut heart would make a good student. This ritual is intended to determine which child is a risk taker, willing to experience the unknown to learn new things. The entire community reinforced these ways by actively offering learning opportunities to children who demonstrate this kind of curiosity. From the time I ate the halibut heart, my extended family and men in the village would take me out fishing whenever there was opportunity.

A month after I ate the halibut heart, my first halibut gave itself to me on a hand-line at age five on an outing with my dad. As is the Aleut custom with the first halibut, I was required to eat its heart to become “one with the halibut”. The spirit of the halibut entered me the moment I swallowed its heart. For hours, as we continued fishing, I gazed at the halibut that chose me. For the first time I experienced a deep and special connection with that which gave my people sustenance for millenias. In my open child mind and heart, I felt that the halibut and I were part of the same fabric that makes up all things, and my respect and reverence for the halibut took on a new meaning.

My first halibut went to the elders and my extended family, and one piece was kept for me to eat. Catching the halibut was exhilarating, but there was nothing like seeing the

delight and gratefulness in the faces of the people to whom I gave the halibut. *Give away your first halibut and halibut will always come to you*, the adults would say.

In the traditional way, I did not ask a lot of questions; instead, I was encouraged to simply observe what the men were doing and to mimic them. It was an experiential school that taught more by action than by words. The total number of words the men used in all the years of learning how to fish were less than the number of words I am using in this article. Whenever there were words, they were filled with lessons. I would listen to my dad and the other men speak in Aleut with reverence about the halibut and the Sea. They would comment on when the tide was turning or whether or not the “bottom was coming up” while fishing in areas where the sea bottom consisted of basalt rocks typical of volcanically created islands. As we drifted, the elevation of the sea bottom would change.

Learning to be aware of the most subtle of sea bottom changes increases the chances of catching halibut. Most halibut feed within three feet off the sea bottom, although many times we caught halibut sixty feet off the bottom when it followed the bait on our hooks as we hauled the lines up. I learned that, depending on age, halibut forage in distinctly different sea bottom terrain. The Bering Sea is the Aleut version of the modern day supermarket. Three-foot halibut were found in one area, four-foot halibut in another, five-foot in another, etc. Through experience, and without the use of compass or map, I learned the sea bottom topography of the entire six-mile radius around St. Paul, as well as the three adjacent islands that make up part of the Pribilofs.

I witnessed how the men would take information in through use of all their senses, about the clouds, color of the water, direction of drift, speed of drift, timing between tides, movement of wind, cloud formations, type of sea bottom, and shape and movement of the Sea in the areas we were in. I began to understand the value of self-awareness and necessity of remaining connected to the Sea, the air, and the land for success in catching halibut and to be safe. I was learning an ancient language of communication with the Bering Sea, Mother Earth, and Father Sky, one that allowed our people to survive and thrive in one of the most challenging of conditions for hundreds of generations.

I went through my next rite of passage at age eleven. My father, John Mercurieff, gave me permission to use his boat and motor to go halibut fishing. I did not have to pass any competency test to earn this privilege; my father knew I was ready. My skills would match those of much older men who did not have the benefit of the Aleut way of knowing. I could navigate safely without a compass in the fog that predominates the summer months when the halibut were back from their southern migrations. I could feel, smell, and read the texture of the sea and air to know when it would be time to return to land to avoid impending storms. I knew how to “ride the skiff or dory” when caught in large swells or breaking sea. I knew what part of the day the halibut preferred to feed, and where and when they go to give birth. I knew the sea bottom like the back of my hand.

Although I was confident of my abilities and skills at this young age, I also knew to have humility and respect for the halibut and the Bering Sea. The price of arrogance in the face of the Great Mystery could mean death. There was always more to learn from the halibut and the Sea, even for the most accomplished seafaring person.

My thoughts come back to the halibut on my hand-line. The way of the handline allows me to feel the halibut directly. The hand-line is our mode of direct communication with the halibut, much like a telephone connection links people-it is how we talk with each other. Through the hand-line, I can feel when the halibut is near the hook before it strikes. This knowledge allows me to prepare for the lightning fast bite on the hook. Otherwise the halibut will take the bait before I can set the hook. I can tell if the bait is being sucked in but not taken by the halibut. I can tell if the halibut is simply moving its body across the bait to determine if it is going to take it. I can tell how the halibut is hooked once it is on the line-by the lip, jaw, gullet, or snagged on the body. This knowledge guides how the halibut is brought up-quickly or slowly, gently or vigorously. I can tell the size of the halibut once it is hooked, and I can tell how much it will fight before hoisting my line. Ability to secure such information determines the degree of success of the fisher. Commercial long-line fishing techniques are devoid of this dimension of connection with the halibut. Younger Aleuts who chose the way of commercial fishing, without learning the traditional Aleut way, lose much in their understanding of the halibut and the ancient ways to communicate with all of nature.

Finally, with the help of my partner, I bring the great halibut into the boat. The wondrous and mysterious female halibut surrendered without further resistance. My sweetheart's eyes well up in tears as we both realized the significance of this moment for the halibut and for each of us. The halibut's death is filled with meaning as she gives her life to us with dignity, power, and grace so that we may sustain ourselves physically, emotionally, culturally, and spiritually.

Honoring the halibut in the way taught for generations, we spent the day carefully and respectfully cutting up the halibut, making sure not to waste any part of it. We returned her skeleton back to the sea so that she will once again chose to return to feed someone else. We drummed and gave a prayer of thanksgiving. We gave away some of the halibut to many in the village, and there was still plenty of halibut to meet our own needs for the rest of the year.

I am thankful for the many blessings and bounty given to me by the halibut and the Bering Sea. After forty-four years of fishing, the spirits of the halibut and the Bering Sea continue to teach me, their Aleut apprentice, my place in the great Circle of Life. After all is said and done, this is the essential gift of wisdom from the halibut heart, given to all who have the courage.