



Keynote Speech by Charitie Ropati
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Waqaa, wiinga yupiuga, yugtun Uguvaaq. Camiunga Karianaaq, Alaska and Anchorage Alaska.

Hello everyone, my name is Charitie Ropati. I am Yup'ik and Samoan and my given name is Uguvaaq. I am from the Native Village of Kongiganak Alaska. It is a tiny community that lies at the mouth of the Lower-Yukon Kuskokwim River in Southwest Alaska. In 1967, families moved from Kwigillingok to create Kongiganak. My great grandfather, and other men moved our homes by wrapping ropes around them, and then using one small tractor, a snow machine) and dog sleds they brought the village, 11 miles Northwest. Our families moved because they knew that the ground was sinking due to the thaw of permafrost. They knew and they thought ahead.

We did this without the help of the federal government, state organizations and outside aid. Time and time again we have seen Indigenous peoples, not only in Alaska but throughout the world, make hard decisions and sacrifices, relying solely on themselves to ensure the survival of the next generation amidst a changing climate. This is the story of how my village came to be, and in part how I came to be.

For thousands of years my people have subsisted from the land and ocean along the west coast of Alaska. Hunting walrus and seals from the Bering sea, catching salmon from the river, and picking blueberries and salmonberries from the tundra, the land has always provided; And whatever was caught, or gathered was always shared by those in our community. This sharing created a bond.. Our people were never "poor" because the land always provided, and we took care of her. This bond brought us joy. **This** is how we define our wealth.

We are taught to respect all living things. The land gave Yupiit meat from animals and birds, while the water provided fish, seals, and whales. In my culture they are considered our relatives. And there is a very close connection between the animal and human world. We believe that humans and animals communicate through *Ellam Yua* and that these relationships are governed by rules. But what happens when these rules

are violated? If the rule is not followed for that particular animal or organism, then that food source will either become scarce or disappear entirely. This is what we're seeing all throughout the Arctic, and all throughout the world.

Fossil fuels are killing us. What more am I to tell you? What more do you need to understand? The act of assigning value to land and commodifying its resources directly contradicts the principles of harmony I learned growing up. Our salmon are disappearing from our rivers, our sea ice is melting, permafrost is thawing, sea levels are rising, land is sinking, my people are dying. What more do you need to know? We are taught that the presence of our sea ice ensures the return of our sea mammals. But tell me what we are to do when that sea ice is no longer there and when our rivers no longer flow with salmon?

Indigenous peoples make up less than 5% of the earth's population but protect 80% of the biodiversity. Despite our dedication to protecting the land, entire ecosystems are dying because global leaders are not willing to do what we all know needs to be done: a just and immediate transition away from fossil fuels.

I have traveled 3,361.46 miles from Alaska to study at Columbia University at the school of engineering to better understand permafrost. I saw my mother, one of the first in our family, cross the stage as she received her Bachelor's degree when I was eleven years old. When I graduate, I will be the first in my family to hold an engineering degree. I will also be the first Alaska native woman to graduate with a civil engineering degree since Columbia's founding, 270 years ago. In those 270 years, not a single federal, state, or local entity has been willing to take action to safeguard our communities from sinking into the ocean.

My grandfather made the hard decision to move our village. 60 years later, I made the hard decision to travel thousands of miles in search of justice. How many more hard decisions do you expect us to make?

Invest in communities that have continuously adapted to climate change, communities like my own. Decisions should not be made about us, without us. We need to be at the table, in these rooms like the one we are in today.

I remember my grandmother teaching me to cut fish for the first time back home in Kongiganak. My hands were shaky as I awkwardly held the ulu to cut parts of the salmon to be hung dried on a rack made of driftwood. After I finished, I lifted the salmon towards her. She grinned, and told me it looked like shark bait. Her gentle teasing gave me joy. I felt connected to her, to my community, and to the land and water.

The ability to hunt and subsist like our people have for thousands of years, to dance and sing in Yugtun, to dream without the fear of occupation – these are the dreams of my generation. It's what I wish for the children in our community. When our children can truly dream, can experience the joy of living in connection with the land, that is Climate Justice. James Baldwin wrote "The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be incapable of morality." You are failing us. Every single one of you.

The Great Death brought epidemics that devastated our communities. Survivors endured the trauma alone in the isolation of their homeland without any support.

Elders advised our people to employ a coping strategy known as nallunguaq -to stay silent, to pretend as if serious trauma never happened. This result of colonialism persists today.

But I learned from my mother to never practice nallunguaq, to never be wordless when my community needs me. So I have traveled over 3000 miles to find myself in a position to tell you: Stop pretending that this crisis is not happening and take direct action. I believe that a just transition from the fossil fuel industry is possible, I need you all to believe this as well.

I am also here to remind you of another indigenous practice that I believe is vital: Joy. When the land is healthy, the people are healthy. But it is also true that when the people are healthy, the land is healthy. So we must approach this unprecedented time of crisis with optimism and hope. Have the courage to invest directly in joy and the joy of our communities.

Even amidst the devastation we are seeing back home in Alaska, my family, my community and myself continue to find joy. To laugh, to tease one another... to grin at the next generation and playfully call their first cut of meat "shark bait." We find wealth through kinship. Practice this as well.

Quyana Cakneq,
Thank you so much for having me.

