

Listening to the Wind

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A couple of weeks ago while preparing for a presentation at our district ministers' retreat I was leafing through a lot of old memorabilia. Along with the report cards and class pictures was a newspaper clipping from when I was in Indian Guides. I must have been about seven years old, kneeling in the front row of a group photo bedecked in my vest and headband with one feather sticking into the air. My blonde crew cut was a cultural contrast to the headband and feather.

I remember those Indian Guides meetings, making crafts and sitting cross-legged in circles. And these memories came flooding back when I encountered the book by Philip Deloria called *Playing Indians*. Deloria's central thesis is that when Europeans came to what they called the 'New World' they wanted to distinguish themselves from the old by trying to become indigenous, by playing like the people who already lived here. While they should be referred to by their tribal or nation's name, the indigenous peoples of the Americas have also had many collective names through history, Indians, Native Americans, First Nation's people. Usually they haven't part of that naming process. So when I refer to them as a group I'll name them as Deloria does – as Indians (except when I slip and call them something else). This process of naming is an example of the issues that we face as we try to be honest about our history, the legacy of Euro-Americans toward the native populations, and the extreme power differential in this process as the Indian people themselves fought to maintain their place as the people of the land while Euro-Americans sought to supplant them.

Playing Indian began very early in our nation's story. We all remember the Boston Tea party. Pictures in my elementary history books showed the feather-bonneted colonists tossing casks of tea over the side of a ship. I always imagined those little barrels as holding great quantities of iced tea and maybe even some slices of lemon, my only experience with tea had been instant from a jar. Along with my ignorance about the state of the tea, I didn't realize that the perpetrators of this celebrated act of civil disobedience were part of a group seeking to legitimate European's Americanness by adopting native costumes and creating their own Indian legends. Called the Tammany Society, this group embodied their claim of sovereignty in America by mimicking characteristics of indigenous people.

Yet while the Bostonians were dressing up in buckskins the Pennsylvanian frontier was awash in warfare, creating the conflicting image of the Indians as both savage and saint. The savage/saint dichotomy began nearly from the time the Pilgrim's landed at Plymouth Rock. James Wilson, in writing *the Earth Shall Weep*, tells how the pilgrims (whose feast we celebrated this past week) immediately found themselves in a conflicted relationship with their Wampanoag neighbors. Upon their first arrival the pilgrims and those who came with them survived on the corn found by foraging. This found corn was foraged in deserted native villages that surrounded their settlement. Indian populations suffered greatly from European disease such as small pox and chicken pox. Squanto, a

central figure in many pilgrim stories, was the sole survivor of his village's encounter with small pox. 75 to 90 percent of many village populations were wiped out. After four months it became apparent that this found grain would not sustain the colonists. Squanto, who was living with the Wampanoags encouraged their leader Massasoit to form an alliance with the new comers at Plymouth. The different understanding of the meaning of this alliance shows the seeds of discord due to differing views of how the world works.

The Wampanoags believed this treaty joined them with the pilgrims in a mutually dependant relationship, one that valued reciprocity. They sought to cement neighborliness by stopping by to visit, assuming they'd be extended the hospitality they showed their visitors. Instead the settlers sent word to those with whom they'd negotiated the treaty with that visits were not welcome. (This leads me to wonder about those thanksgiving paintings showing the happy colonists and Indians sitting together) Unlike the Wampanoag who believed that courtesy and trade were ritual acts demonstrating the mutual dependence necessary for survival, the Pilgrims sought isolation from these new neighbors.

And within the minds of the European settlers a conflicting understanding of what the indigenous people represented must have been dawning. Without the Indian's food, which some settlements relied on for decades, the Europeans would never have established their foothold. Yet without removing their saviors from the land they could never possess it. How could they admit that they owed their survival to people they believed were their cultural, religious inferiors, and how could they take possession of the land without finding a reasonable excuse for removing them? Thus began the image of the savage, who didn't properly use the land. The whole idea of the savage is not a historically credible one. The Indians were called savages in spite of the reality. In warfare their European allies derided them for not being violent enough; their religion was ridiculed as pagan and simplistic (often given as sufficient reason for persecution). To be historically fair, the Indians were called savages as a pretext for their elimination, not for any other reason.

It wasn't until the mid to late 1700s that the European colonists began to think of themselves as having a non-European identity – even then many did not. But this is where Philip Deloria picks up the trail. The primary image used by political cartoonists to represent the colonies in America was that of an Indian maiden. In a widely circulated image she's shown being abused by the wigged and top-coated men, characters of England. Tammany Societies fostered a sense of Indianness in their members. Both became potent images of rebellion.

Once securely free from their European masters, settlers continued to violently push native peoples off their land and eulogize them as saints at the same time. Throughout the 18th and 19th century Red Man societies sprang up through out the colonies. While battles still raged in the south and west, these societies searched for real Indians to help guide their role plays. In modern times that same extinct Indian of the past is a central image of our national identity. The dominant one is that of the plains Indians.

The image of the Plains people is so strong in our national consciousness that if we close our eyes and visualize “Indian” many of us would see the feather bonneted warrior portrayed in Hollywood movies. I remembered sitting in a theater in Waterloo as the lights came up after the movie *Dances with Wolves*. My father in law (a part Lakota who spent part of his childhood near Pine Ridge) turned to me and said, “Look what your people did to my people.” It was on the plains that one of the last chapters of our history with native people was written – the final military conflict, stuff of movies and legends. Wilson calls it “the most potent symbol of the triumph of manifest destiny”.

This theological conviction, “Manifest Destiny” became very potent as our nation expanded west. When I attended elementary school in California the concept of Manifest Destiny was an important feature of our history curriculum. It was this that brought people to the West, God’s goal for colonization of America. Treaties signed by different tribes were broken by settlers who believed it was their right to take the land. At issue was what it meant to use the land as “God had intended”. At the time of colonists the proper use of the land was to put it under the plow, clear it and cultivate it. Anyone not using the land in this way should be displaced. Lest we forget that it was the Indians who taught those colonists how to grow crops here and they did cultivate a great deal of land. Some was lying fallow intentional and some was cleared, but gone to seed due to the effects of disease mentioned earlier. Yet on the plains they were nomadic hunter – because this (as many a failed farmer found) was the most productive way to live on the land.

A quick aside or maybe a confession. I always grew up with the subtle bias nagging in my brain that said, you know we did defeat the Indians after all – so whatever we give them they should be grateful for. Yet this isn’t true (beyond the fact that a nation should feel obligated to fulfill its promises to others—the United States has signed more than 370 treaties with Indians and everyone of them has been broken by US citizens) not every treaty was written after the Euro-Americans defeated a tribe or nation. For instance, the black hills were deemed to be the property of the Sioux after years of warfare resulted in a standstill at best. President Grant’s Secretary of the Interior estimated that it was costing almost \$1 million per Indian killed and the government conceded defeat in 1868.

But it really didn’t matter what native peoples did or won. When the government signed a treaty they did little to enforce it and the conflicts based on culture, religion and world view meant that the tension of having this other in the midst of a holy enterprise could not continue. At the time of the 19th century there were two competing views toward the Indian question. One was for totally eradicating the native peoples, the other was to try and integrate them into Euro society as quickly as possible. Both of these positions denigrated Indian culture and ignored their world view. Both allowed for the types of atrocities such as the trail of tears and Wounded Knee.

The ultimate bureaucratic expression of this world view conflict came with the Dawes act. Senator Henry Dawes, its author, formed his answer to the Indian question after a visit to the Cherokee nation. He reported that each family had its own home. There was not a pauper in the nation and the nation did not owe a dollar. They’d built their own

capitol, schools and hospital. Yet he found a defect in their system that would keep them from becoming “civilized,” they owned their land in common. He said, “There is no selfishness, which is at the bottom of civilization. Till this people will consent to give up their lands, and divide them among their citizens... they will not make much progress.”

Greed, therefore, needed to be forced into their world view so that the Cherokee would become civilized. The result of the Dawes act was to break up tribal land holdings and attempt to destroy native customs and traditions that reinforced their belief in a reciprocal world view. But it was precisely this selfishness that was antithetical to their traditions. It was precisely this selfishness that prevented Euro-Americans from joining them as the people of the land.

Dressing up in Indian style, as the members of the Boston Tea party, the Redman’s Societies, Indian Guides all miss the mark of what was central to being indigenous, what’s central to what made the native people the people of the land. Even much later when Euro-Americans sought to embrace the spirituality of the Indians, we missed the centrality of the world view that these traditions represent. As our highly individualistic society practiced the rituals of the sweat lodge or attempted vision quests we individualized the message rather than understanding that its goal was to help not our individual souls but deepen our commitment to, and find our gifts for, our community. A friend of mine in seminary, Renee Whiterabbit told me of a sacred tree of her people. When whites learned of it, they stripped pieces of bark from it, one little piece at a time until they killed the tree. These people went to the tree for their individual glorification, thinking that by owning a piece of it they were special. This living tree had represented a communal connection to the earth for Renee’s people.

While there are definite differences between tribes and nations, there are similar characteristics. These include that sense of reciprocity. From the Europeans first encounter with native people there was conflict over the idea of mutual dependence, on each other and on the natural world. Vine Deloria Jr. (Philip’s father) in *God is Red* describes the difference as expressed through sacred space versus sacred history. For the Indian peoples space, place is what is held in reverence. All is an embodiment of a divine energy or creator and human beings have their particular role in that creation, never over and above it but totally within creation. Balance is the ultimate aim and that balance is achieved in this world, as a sense of harmony maintained through ritual acts which reinforce the interconnection and human dependence on the natural world.

Sacred history believes that we are part of a plan being acted out in time, Good versus evil or the divine road map. The world is merely the stage for this action. The Euro-American vision of sacred history was and too often is expressed as a divine right, to conquer lands and the native people there. The earliest settlers believed they were sent by God to create a new Eden, everything here serving as fodder for that creation. This idea of creation morphed into Manifest Destiny. The protestant work ethic reinforced the idea that a person’s wealth was a measure of holiness, of favor with God.

While the sacred stories of the Euro-Americans were about conquest and a unique righteousness, Wilson says the sacred stories of the Indians were about the holiness of place and how to live in harmony with the environment. Author activist Carol Lee Sanchez defines the difference saying, "Euro-American people waste their resources and destroy the environment in the Americas because they are not spiritually connected to this land base, because they have no ancient or legendary origins rooted to this land." She describes how tribal culture restored damaged ecosystems and imbedded mistakes into their stories so they could remember what happened and not repeat their mistakes.

In order for us to begin to heal, we need to follow this example. Allow our history to reflect what's really happened so that we might learn from these mistakes and not make them again. This means being honest about how the country came to be as it is, the lives lost in the conquest. Beyond this honest reassessment, we must attempt to become people of the land, whose stories seek harmony with creation, whose sense of hospitality extends to every living creature, whose understanding of interdependence does not seek to own land, but protect it.

When we begin to live in this way, we may be able to heal the deep wounds that still exist with the Indian people with whom we still share this country. Guilt, remorse or continued fictionalizing of our history won't help us to heal. Give them what is rightfully theirs, land, respect and an apology for many wrongs done. But for all our sake, let us not stop there. Let's stop trying to take on the surface characteristics and learn from their indigenous worldview, awakening in ourselves a realization of what it means to be indigenous people, a people who know their home is with this land and only by seeking harmony with all will we ever find peace within.

Sources

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