



Montana's Agenda

ISSUES SHAPING OUR STATE



The Dignity of Indian Self-sufficiency

by Bill Yellowtail*

“American Indians have to stop identifying themselves by their tragedies and begin identifying themselves by their hopes, expectations and successes.”

Those are my true feelings, but not my words. They were given me by Robert, a friend who is not Indian.

Here are some truthful words of my own. I have finally admitted the excruciating fact that fry bread is killing Indian people. How can Indian soul food hurt us? It's all about processed flour, sugar, saturated fats—that bad stuff that makes us obese and diabetic. It's tragic, but true, so I'm trying to cut back on my fry bread intake. I tried going cold turkey, but couldn't hack it. That's where Robert comes in. Over at “Granny's” he dispenses friendly chat and the finest doughnuts, which I'm substituting for fry bread.

Though Robert's words don't come from my head, they resonate in my heart: We Indian people have to stop identifying ourselves by our tragedies, and begin identifying ourselves by our hopes and successes. Let me offer a few examples: First, we Indians must reconstruct the important value of Indian sovereignty. Notice that I did not say tribal sovereignty. Indian sovereignty is the personal autonomy and dignity that comes from self-sufficiency. Concurrently, I believe that achieving

Indian sovereignty in the 21st century will involve soul-searching and a return to core Indian values.

A culture of despair

Hopelessness is killing Indian people even more surely than fry bread, but neither tragedy is necessary. We must change our internal compass to find hope and success. Only we can reorient ourselves. For 200 years we have depended on the Great White Father, church men and women, lawyers

and consultants, Congress and bureaucrats, and even the tribal council. But look what it has gotten us:

- *The shortest life expectancy of any ethnic group in the country;*
- *The highest rates of teen pregnancy and infant mortality;*
- *Disastrous rates of family dysfunction and teen suicide;*
- *Epidemics of diabetes and substance abuse;*
- *Dismal scholastic achievement: 33 Montana schools failed in 2006 to meet No Child Left Behind objectives and every one of those schools serves primarily an Indian student body;*
- *The poorest counties in the nation; the poorest is on a South Dakota reservation and the next three are on Montana reservations;*
- *Unemployment rates in Montana Indian communities of 50 percent to 70 percent, when the statewide rate stands at 4 percent.*

I could go on, but maybe Montana's "Indian Education for All" has already brought home these facts. For sure, we Indians are mortified by this and hate to air these facts publicly. But the truth we need to confront is this: We can't fool anybody but ourselves. The time has come for us to put aside political correctness. Others won't speak up, maybe because Indians are a powerfully scary bunch or they want to be polite and not offend us. But we Indians must see that tiptoeing around wastes time and prevents honest examination of the toughest, most imperative human issues.

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We have a choice. We can continue being consumed by bleakness and despondency or we can say ENOUGH! The status quo is unacceptable. We must take charge of our future. We can't wait for someone else to fix things.

This culture of despair worries me more than anything. A destructive dissonance has arisen between our revered traditional culture and our day-to-day way of life. Dependency and despondency have beaten down self-sufficiency and dignity. A generational downward spiral of despair has created what sociologists call "learned helplessness," a sense of no personal possibilities, and "intergenerational trauma," a lack of willpower almost hereditarily transmitted.

Even further, we experience what a professional friend calls "Chronic Traumatic Stress Syndrome," that is, young children becoming permanently damaged by recurring exposure to the trauma of dysfunctional households. The effects resemble those of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, another too familiar tragedy: attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, and inability to discern social appropriateness. These syndromes sound theoretical, but the ugly truth is that they are real and epidemic. Our communities are awash in trash, substance abuse, violence, depression, and crime. What circumstances could be more antithetical to traditional American Indian culture?

Victimhood

Besides rejecting denial and blaming others (the schools, the system, the White Man, the Bureau of Indian Affairs), we must also reject the too easy response of "victimhood." Victimhood as a cultural myth—that is, a self-actualizing identity—poses a powerful danger for Indians. In 2002 Michael Running Wolf, a Northern Cheyenne, wrote: "We walk the border between protecting our values and acting the part of victim. Not victims in the sense of being injured individuals, but subscribing to the belief that we deserve sympathy. It's a belief that bases our identity upon the wrongs we have endured, rather than our accomplishments and integrity." Running Wolf is right. There is no future in victimhood or in pity, its self-destructive corollary, but we Indians have become incredibly adept at the pity card.

Even though the bicentennial observance of Lewis and Clark rightfully evoked bitter memories of injustice, Amy Mossett, a Hidatsa-Mandan historian, insists that we must move on: "Our tribes have survived catastrophic events in the past 200 years. But if we grieve forever, we will never move forward." More pointedly, Sam Deloria, Lakota lawyer and director of the American Indian Graduate Center in Albuquerque, declares that universities should "quit perpetuating the theory that Indians are victims of multigenerational suffering because previous generations attended boarding schools. . . . We sell our kids short when we treat them as victims." Birdena Realbird, a Crow public school educator and traditionalist, asserts that excuse-making serves no constructive end. "It is not Indian to fail," Realbird says. "We ought to view ourselves as fortified by our heritage and, therefore, better equipped than most other folks to prevail over whatever challenge arises."

The task of changing our paradigm will take time and tools that we ourselves can create. That was the Indian way before Lewis and Clark wandered through our territory. That is the philosophy Michael Running Wolf declares: “Empowerment not crafted by one’s own strengths is an illusion.”

Beyond tribal sovereignty

In 1971, Alvin Josephy and other Indian leaders put a name to the emergence of a new Native American paradigm, self-determination, which has informed the “Indian debate” for more than 30 years. He defined the concept as the right of tribes “to decide programs and policies for themselves, to manage their own affairs, to govern themselves, and to control their land and its resources.” Tribal self-determination evolved into the policy that both Indians and non-Indians call tribal sovereignty. I believe that this evolution should continue toward a new model: Indian sovereignty.

While huge credit is due the warriors of tribal sovereignty, we must point out a shortcoming: its failure to emphasize the role of the individual Indian. Even with gains in tribal sovereignty, we continue to experience the devastation of personal and family lives by poverty, unemployment, and illness. We should think of these human challenges as Indian sovereignty: the need to re-equip Indian people with the dignity of self-sufficiency. We need to shift from tribal-think to Indian-think.

Indian sovereignty is not a new notion. It is circling back to an ancient and crucial Indian value: the wellbeing of the tribal community depends upon the collective energy of self-initiating, risk-taking, independent, healthy and, therefore, powerful individuals. We Indians are too focused on tribal think—on tribal jurisdiction and tribal programs—that involve power and control but overlook the daily exigencies of Indian living. Tribal governments try hard to rescue the people by “program,” but typically little of the tribal budget goes toward individual empowerment and self-sufficiency. Issues of tribal jurisdiction—admittedly complex and important—are far more attention-getting and much easier than messy human issues.

I acknowledge that there might be dissenting opinions. I suspect that the late Vine Deloria, an influential Indian thinker, might have labeled my thinking heresy. On the other hand, a next-generation Deloria, Philip, of the University of Michigan, argues persuasively in *Indians in Unexpected Places* that Indians

have always been enthusiastic adapters. Let us, then, be willing to make the distinction between the tribe as a traditional culture and the tribe as a governmental entity. Let us not downplay the importance of economic and infrastructure development, but let us insist that tribal governments carry out these essential functions with an eye toward building the capacity of Indian persons and families.

The “not-Indian” fallacy

A cursory review of Indian legends and archives reveals men and women distinguished for their empathy and generosity toward the less fortunate—the highest of civil values. But, whence this capacity for doing good? The Indian men and women we celebrate for their largesse obviously generated wealth in the first place. Whether we call the enabling virtue courage or entrepreneurship, it was present and it was the Indian way.

We Indians are nothing if not creative, adaptable, and durable. We must apply these traditional traits to today’s global economy, which is driven by capitalism and trade. Economic prosperity is a critical part of Indian sovereignty. To dismiss entrepreneurship as “not-Indian” is simply mistaken. Such shortsightedness amounts to self-defeat.

Some will argue that individual enterprise contradicts the Indian tribal ethic of commitment to the welfare of the whole. It is true that Indian people from ancient times have always valued the interdependence of all people and all things; kinship has been the key to our survival. This belief is a treasure we can offer to Western philosophy. With all due respect, however, we have to acknowledge the corollary truth that individual initiative, ability, and resourcefulness are neither selfish nor greedy. Individual success supports our native altruism and generosity. This is no less true now than it was two hundred or two thousand years ago.

Seizing our destiny

Our uniqueness as Indians will sustain us. Indian culture at its core has endured while evolving spiritually, linguistically, artistically, and economically. This is what Gerald Vizenor, White Earth Chippewa poet and professor, has called “survivance,” which implies an evolving culture rather than simple continuance of old ways. I embrace that view.

Too often we have agonized over cultural choices

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and change. Too often tribal myth has become frozen in time. Too often fear of our culture police has made us into static mannequins. Too often our traditional values have been reserved for periodic celebrations and have failed to inform our daily lives.

I love what one Indian school in Montana is doing. Every day Indian kids demonstrate their belief in themselves by shouting out their values: Integrity! Respect! Justice! Stewardship! Spirituality! Excellence! When challenged about their determination, they shout: No excuses! Step Up!

All Indians must resurrect our age-old tradition of self-sufficiency. We must give ourselves permission to pursue education, to ply our professions outside of the reservation, and to return to our homelands to be nourished by family and landscape. I think we should take Vizenor-like liberty with his language and change "survivance" to "thrivance." We must not only survive; we must thrive. Now that is a myth to believe in.

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