

"Plenty Coups Speaks of Radical Hope"

Reflection offered by Carol Thompson, April 28, 2013

Let's set the stage. It is in the 1890's in Montana. Plenty Coups is a Crow Indian Chief. For centuries Crow men establish themselves as warriors by hunting buffalo, waging war with other tribes and "counting coups." ...touching an enemy with a coups stick before they kill him and planting their coups stick in the ground. For each coups they earn a feather. Plenty Coups is said to have 50-100 feathers when he lays to rest his war bonnet. He is a mighty warrior. His tribe trusts him.

And then life as he knows it changes forever. "Foreigners" invade the land. They kill off the buffalo. They push the Crow further west to smaller pieces of land; they kill the horses. They tell the Crow that they must live on a reservation and stop killing their enemies. And Plenty Coups agrees. As a matter of fact he becomes a link with the White Man and his culture. Why? What future? How does he know that he is a warrior? If all the things are gone which determine that he is a warrior then what is he? Once the identity of the Crow is taken away there is the possibility that they will not survive as a nation.

Many years later Plenty Coups told his story to a White man that he trusted named Linderman. He said: "...but when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them anymore. After this nothing happened."

"After this nothing happened." There was nothing left of the Crow as an individual or tribe, so nothing happened. Jonathan Lear, a University of Chicago philosophy professor, focused on that phrase in his book "Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation". If being a Crow warrior meant fighting the Sioux, taking coups, and hunting buffalo, and being a Crow wife meant collecting feathers for each coups your husband took, dancing to hunting and war, and cooking, tanning and sewing with buffalo hide, who are you when that is no longer possible. How do you raise your children to be Crow?

“After this nothing happened.” This sounds like the end of a nation and the identity of the individuals in that nation. But Plenty Coups, who was subject to vision dreams, had had one such dream as a youth. He dreamt of a voice telling him to pay attention to the “lodge of the chickadee”. In his dream all other bird lodges were destroyed in a great wind, except the chickadee. He heard a voice in his dream: “Only one person is left unharmed, the lodge of the Chickadee – person. Develop your body, but do not neglect your mind, Plenty Coups it is the mind that leads a man to power, not strength of the body.” In that dream you are given a possible answer... “do not neglect your mind.”

In his world where he could no longer be a Crow Warrior, Plenty Coups urged his tribe to make changes: “farm, go to school, and learn to speak with the white man.” He could not know if this would save his tribe but they trusted in his vision of the “chickadee man”. “Education is your most powerful weapon. With education you are the white man’s equal; without education you are his victim.”

Jonathan Lear saw this as “radical hope”, a commitment to a “goodness that transcends one’s current understanding of the good... [a commitment] to the bare idea that something good will emerge. It is basically the hope for revival: “for coming back to life in a form that is not yet intelligible...the hope is held in the face of the recognition that given the abyss, one cannot really know what survival means.” When we are in that abyss if we are to survive **we must reinvent who we are**. We must hope and trust in revival.

“Radical Hope” focuses on the devastation of a society; I think the ideas can also be applied to devastation of an individual. Each of us has probably encountered a time when our lives seemed hopeless or when we suffered a great tragedy. I came from a family that was mixed between blue collar and professional. My mother and father didn’t see social behavior in the same way at all, although their views of moral and work ethics were the same, thankfully. Yet, I was expected to go to college and I found a niche in the Drama Department where there was little judgment except concerning another student’s talent. When I graduated from college I found a job teaching high school English and drama; I was a fish out of water. The blue class Thompson jokes would not fly in that setting, but my

mother's side of the family didn't help either because they didn't teach me social behavior. My family didn't entertain so there was no opportunity to learn conversation or social manners. I was terrified. I had no idea how to behave. I watched others endlessly. I learned to make casseroles for the pot luck suppers, I ordered the New York Times because everyone else in the English department read it. I wasn't even sure I liked the newspaper and I was hopeless at the crossword puzzle, which was a mark of intellectual standing in the English Department. I was pretty quiet, just watching, which I later found made people think I was aloof when I was really just scared and sure I would put a foot wrong. Watching and listening. Those were the two things I did consistently. As it turns out watching and listening were valuable. I did learn the social role I needed to play. It is also crucial in my work today. I learned how to operate in this academic society. I found the pieces of me that fit as a teacher. I "reinvented myself". As it turned out that was not who I truly was but it was a valuable step on the road. As I was learning to survive in this new world it felt like I was on a trapeze and I had let go of one bar flying through the air hoping that someone had let the bar go on the other side of space. I could no longer straddle two social classes. I had to decide where I fit and learn new social rules at the same time I continued to dance between the two worlds of my family.

Radical hope, a combination of trust and fortitude, an inner place in which we make decisions based on our trust that something good will come of reinventing ourselves. We don't know anything for sure. We can't be sure that even reinventing ourselves is the answer to a new life. But the Crow and I made a decision to trust that we would find our new life in which we could prosper, that we could learn new social rules and new ways to support our lives. That positive, hopeful way of looking at the world gave me the courage to reinvent myself as I'm sure it has many others. It is what I often speak to clients about in my job as a therapist. "If you don't like the place in which you find yourself, change it or change yourself."

Many of us came to All Souls not knowing who we were. We only knew what we were not. We were no longer Catholic, Muslim, Lutheran, UCC, or religiously Jewish. We were looking for a religious home, wandering on our life's journey no longer able to fit where we had been raised but not fitting into another religion. Many of us did not believe in a deity and therefore could not find a church, as most churches have some kind of deity or we could not find a congregation that would welcome us. We were awash in doubt and ungrounded by any belief. That ungroundedness left us without a spiritual identity. However we did it, we arrived at All Souls. Maybe we were invited by a friend, or trying out various churches, but we did arrive.

All Souls doesn't promise a spiritual identity any more than the chickadee in Plenty Coups vision dream promised a new identity. But what both do promise is hope. A hope that will be supported and accepted by other souls, other souls who will listen to our vision dream. With hope comes trust also, that we trust our fellow souls to walk with us in our journey and accept our dreams, we trust our fellow souls to let the trapeze go so that we can catch it as we become airborne because they are a part of the new soul we are becoming.

Amen