

## Thoughts on Reading *Radical Hope* by Jonathan Lear

By Alice Loyd

Those of us past denial about the planet's condition and the future of the industrial economic model tend to be well-informed about the ecological, economic and social possibilities. We've read James Howard Kunstler's *The Long Emergency* (Grove/Atlantic 2005), Paul Gilding's *The Great Disruption* (Bloomsbury Press 2008) or one of the fine books on this topic by John Michael Greer.<sup>1</sup> We understand there will be suffering as our growth-based market system meets resource depletion; as climate change brings on crop failures, sea rise and resultant population migrations; and as governments stagger under new burdens for which they are ill-prepared. Most of us expect severe decline to come in our lifetimes, perhaps abruptly, bringing fewer physical comforts for the currently comfortable, and a terrible stripping away of necessities for the already poor.

Until I read Jonathan Lear's book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Harvard University Press 2006), however, I hadn't given much thought to the moral impact on individuals during cultural collapse—to the disorientation of character that may result when the culture within which a human character was formed abruptly dissolves. Humans become human through the influence of their human milieu. What is the outcome when the milieu of formation ceases to exist?

I've always lived in ways that gave me distance from the culture in which I'm positioned. I was brought up in a pocket of Victorian-era morals and fundamentalist religious beliefs. I thought I yearned to be culturally normal, but once grown, I found mainstream values unsatisfactory. It's hard for me to see myself as a creature of this society, but I would guess its influence is invisible rather than non-existent. Its collapse is sure to alter my world beyond my shadowy imaginings. How will my values hold up? How will my neighbors cope with the changes? What will be the impact of world upheaval on the inner lives of the generations in place to experience it?

In *Radical Hope* author Lear considers a particular example, Chief Plenty Coups and the Crow Indian tribe of the northern and central American Great Plains in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His theme is four words uttered by Chief Plenty Coups, told to a white man shortly before the Chief's death: "*After this nothing happened.*" The last great chief of the Crow nation had talked freely about his own childhood and about the struggles that had brought him and his people onto a reservation, but as the recorder noted in an afterword, Plenty Coups refused to speak of his long life after the hunting and warring era ended. In excuse, the chief stated, "You know that part of my life as well as I do."

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<sup>1</sup>Three of these by Greer are *The Long Descent: A User's Guide to the End of the Industrial Age* (New Society Publishers 2008); *The EcoTechnic Future: Envisioning a Post-Peak World* (New Society Publishers 2009); and *The Wealth of Nature: Economics As If Survival Mattered* (New Society Publishers 2011).

*After this nothing happened* is Lear's aperture for understanding what it means when a civilization ends. The Crow way of life had been based on the warfare required by their nomad existence among Sioux, Cheyenne, Blackfeet and Arapaho enemies. When the U.S. Army became an enemy of the entire Indian population, the Crow alone made peace with those whom they saw as the inevitable victors. Guided by tribal insights drawn from their traditions, they accepted their only survival possibility and agreed to confine their occupancy to one area of their once vast territory.

The verdict of Plenty Coups 40 years later was that, while the accommodation was the right move and had assured that the most precious of their lands remained undisturbed, such peace as subsequent years brought them was without events to which they could assign meaning. They continued to perform the necessary functions that sustain life, and many of these might to an outsider appear the same as before. Through Crow eyes, these actions, though vital, attained no significance. Lear's interpretation is that actions to which no cultural meaning can be assigned cannot be considered happenings.

### **The Traditional Crow Culture**

The book, describing each major category of behavior within the tribe's world view, relates in detail the common happenings during the period of the traditionally functioning Crow nation. To protect their moving territory against the other Indian groups vying to unseat them, they evolved an identifying ethic based on courage in warfare: "counting coups."<sup>2</sup> Their culture's criterion for worth was courage in battles with other tribes and in hunting buffalo. Deeds of courage included stealing horses from another tribe without getting caught, injured, or noticed; killing a buffalo in a dangerous situation; in a fight, reaching out with a stick (a "coup stick") to touch an armed enemy and then putting the stick away before picking up one's weapon; and, when the battle got close to the camp or territory of the Crow tribe, "planting one's coup stick" in the ground, which meant "I will fight to the death to keep any non-Crow from getting past me."

When warriors returned from a battle or a hunt, they told their deeds of courage, and if others agreed on the merit, the warrior was awarded a feather to be worn in a headdress. The

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<sup>2</sup>**coup** (koo), *n. pl. coups* (kooz): 1. A brilliantly executed stratagem; a triumph. 2. a. A coup d'état. b. A sudden appropriation of leadership or power; a takeover: *a boardroom coup*. 3. Among certain Native American peoples, a feat of bravery performed in battle, especially the touching of an enemy's body without causing injury.

*Idiom:* count coup: Among certain Native American peoples, to ceremoniously recount one's exploits in battle.

telling and rewarding for the deeds was called "counting coups." These honorable deeds formed the framework for the work of the women and the play of the children as well. Preparing a meal meant support for present and future warriors and their families. Child's play meant to emulate warrior conduct for boys, and for girls it meant to provide encouragement and strategic support. Each was learning the language and style of their future adult roles.

### **The Accommodation to Whites**

It is easy to note that once traditional life ended, new roles would be required, and there would be a sense of loss to contend with as well as physical discomfort, disease and dissolution of routine. Lear reads a great deal more than these consequences into the experience, though, as he studies Plenty Coups' words. He says that Crow life had been kept intact through winning in battle—with all aspects of daily life geared to that outcome. Once winning in battle ceased to be possible, the motives supporting daily life ceased to exist.

Their accommodation to whites was an ending quite different from any for which they were prepared. Throughout the 100 years of their wandering history, what they had feared was being killed as individuals or incorporated into other tribes—either being the end of the Crow identity. Lear stresses that when all other tribes had been subdued by the Crows in league with the U.S. cavalry, their Crow identity ended nevertheless, because no longer could they win in battle because no longer did fighting mean preserving their way of life. Stealing the enemies' horses no longer was laudable conduct, because there was no enemy so easily located and no use for the horses once they were stolen.

Women's lives, too, were robbed of accustomed significance. Whereas earlier a woman cooked to make her family strong enough to fight and to support those who fought, meals now were emptied of that meaning, even when food, even familiar food, could be found. To eat now was an act entirely different from eating purposefully within clear Crow boundaries protected by Crow courage. Agnes Yellowtail Deernose reported, "Destruction of the buffalo and the shift to a reservation left young men and women in a state of social limbo." Pretty Shield, after relating a poignant event in family life, said, "I am trying to live a life I do not understand." (p. 60-61) Lear comments there was no larger framework of significance into which life could fit, saying, "The problem is what happens to the subject when the possibility of living according to (the subject's) associated ideals collapses." (p. 44)

Lear writes about the earlier period, "It required a steadfast commitment stretching over much of one's life to organize one's life in relation to those ideals. And it required a certain success in doing so. That is, being a Crow subject required more than inhabiting a social role, being excellent in that role, and even identifying oneself in those terms. It required all these things, but in addition it required a lifelong commitment to shaping oneself to be this kind of person." (p. 43)

When the culture that shaped the ideals collapses, a moment comes that Yeats could have been describing when he wrote, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."

## **After That Nothing Happened**

Readers are directed to realize that something other than depression is meant by the words, "After that nothing happened." Lear takes care to show that Plenty Coups' conduct was not that of a depressed individual. He, insisting that his people learn the white man's ways, without idealizing them, entered energetically into the settled life of a farmer and villager. "The white man," he said, "is someone who fools nobody but himself. . . .With all his wonderful powers, the white man is not wise. He is smart, but not wise." His appraisal of his tribe was equally challenging. He admonished them by saying, "Stop mourning the old days, they are gone with the buffalo. Go to your sweat lodges and cleanse your bodies . . . then clean out your dirty lodges and go to work!" (p.139)

Off the reservation Plenty Coups maintained his role as statesman for his people. He stood with dignity beside U.S. leaders, representing the position that the Crow had partnered in the successful pacification of the U.S. West. "Their undefeated status remains a source of pride among the Crow. Plenty Coups was received at the highest levels of the U.S. government in Washington—as were other Crow chiefs—and treated with respect." (p. 137)

While never describing the circumstances in which our own civilization might fail, Lear's interest clearly comes from seeing parallels with Crow history, and the title of the book communicates very well what he seeks to find. In this history of the demise of a recently intact American civilization, he seeks to find a basis and strategy for maintaining hope in the face of the collapse of ours. His conclusion is that at the point when Crow culture might be expected to be lost entirely, an essential core was preserved amid the rubble. In the case of the Crow, he traces survival to an enduring ideal of excellence, which Plenty Coups brought into view through the symbol of the chickadee.

## **Hope in the Symbol of the Chickadee**

The chickadee had been a theme in Crow culture since before his own lifetime, but it became a particularly important wisdom teacher when Plenty Coups saw it in a dream during a vision quest that took place when he was eight or nine years old, before the whites had come. The dream was recognized at that time by tribal elders as a valid prophecy of their future, but the events to which it pointed were far beyond their range of vision. Here is a much-abbreviated version of this portion of the dream:

*At first great herds of buffalo were spreading wide, blackening the plains with their numbers. Then all the buffalo were gone, completely vanished. Next came bulls and cows and calves past counting, but they lay down, not as the buffalo, and hardly any two were alike in size and color. Then the dreamer was shown an old man sitting under a particular tree. "That man is yourself," he was told, and there followed a tremendous storm that knocked down all the trees in the forest except that one.*

*"Listen Plenty-Coups," said a voice. "In that tree is the lodge of the Chickadee. He is least in strength, but strongest of mind among his kind. He is willing to work for wisdom. The Chickadee-person is a good listener . . . (he) never misses a chance to learn from others."*

The Crow elders used dreams cooperatively, sending young men out on vision quests and in ceremony, later seeking together their proper interpretation. In this case, the wisest of the elders offered an understanding of Plenty Coups' vision. By the end of the dream, he said, "The tribes who have fought the white man have all been beaten, wiped out. By listening as the Chickadee listens we may escape this and keep our lands." Guided by this dream, the tribe decided to ally with the white man against their traditional enemies and thus weather the oncoming storm.

Lear says the dream gave the tribe "imaginative tools with which to endure a conceptual onslaught." (p. 78) What holding onto their lands would come to mean was totally outside their ability to conceive at the time of the dream. It came to mean 2 million rather than 35 million acres, and those were parceled out to individual owners and sometimes sold to white farmers. But the tribe was able to set the conditions under which the allotment took place, retain all mineral rights, and defeat the attempt to sell off "unused" land to white settlers. At the end of his life, Plenty Coups could say with pride that "this course was the only one which might save our beautiful country for us. When I think back my heart sings because we acted as we did. It was the only way open to us." (p. 143)

According to Lear's understanding, the chickadee's virtue is good judgment based on information gathered by listening to others. When Plenty Crow as an individual or the Crow as a community acted from that virtue, however, the outcome was not assured. Lear comments, "This is not the paradigm risk of death on the battlefield, to be sure. It was a greater risk: that one . . . was unwittingly doing something shameful, not fine, that one's strategy would not ultimately work." (p. 146)

More than surrender of acreage and loss of nomadic life was involved in societal collapse for the Crow, since during the period 1870 to 1940 the U.S. government enforced a deliberate strategy to break down traditional tribal values. Children were sent away to be re-socialized. Certain religious practices were outlawed. Yet Plenty Coups was consistent in drawing on traditional Crow resources "to formulate an *ego-ideal of radical hope*. This ideal gave the Crow a basis of hope at a time when it was systematically unclear what one could hope for." (p. 141, italics Lear's.)

Previously Lear had stated, "The Crow were not able magically to turn the tide of history. The onslaught of the white man was a force that no Indian tribe could resist. That outcome is just as the dream predicted. The question is whether the hopefulness manifest in the dream facilitated a courageous response to the new challenges the Crow would face. To the extent that the dream was confirmed—that the Crow did survive and did hold onto their land—what role did that hope play in securing this outcome?" His conclusion is that the role was considerable. (p. 136) "Plenty Coups was able to take a valued and honored spiritual force and

put it to creative use in facing up to new challenges. . . Plenty Coups offered the Crow a traditional way of going forward.” (p. 154)

### **Radical Hope—Our Wisdom**

As you might expect, reading *Radical Hope* has prompted me to look for moral underpinnings of our own civilization that might outlast it. The topic is not whether we can be hopeful about the degree of chaos we’ll have to face. As I understand it, the question is this: If, when the industrial era should dissolve, we should find ourselves without recognizable ways of living because all familiar patterns of life have disappeared with it, what then might be the source of hope from which a new way of living might be constructed?

In other words, do members of our industrialized Western civilization hold internalized ethical ideals capable of carrying communities through monumental and even calamitous change?

Considering the social, economic and ecological conditions that we are already experiencing, I think conversation about this topic is appropriate. Going forward, I would feel safer if together we identified familiar, enduring and effective symbols capable of guiding our civilization through its demise.

Perhaps readers of the *Musings* would like to contribute their thoughts.