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Hope from the Land of the Polar Bear: An on-going Narrative Report

By Associate Professor George Meegan, F.R.G.S.

ABSTRACT

In this paper the author presents results of his latest attempt to get his research taken up, and as been laid out in the Review over many years, [Rev. Fac. Mar. Sci. Kobe Univ., No. 2] *passim*. It concerns a fundamental alternative in general basis Education.

The focus of the research is, and has always been, the safety of children in what is the most marginalized groups in the United States of America; this is the American Indian. In connection the US Homeland Security have given this author access and entry to the said US, and to pursue what is recognised as extremely difficult work.

Seeking a trigger to set of reform I returned to Red Lake (Sovereign) Reservation, where, with KU students we paid out respects, last summer. Red Lake shot to world-fame when 17 members of the school were tragically shot by a child, and leading to 10 fatalities. Could this be the place where the university's research can be put into a practical, social experient?

The base of operations was again at Bemidji State University, which is 26 miles to the south of the Reservation. It is with especial thanks to BSU, one of whom officers summed it all up by saying "You do good work."

1. INTRODUCTION

At the headwaters of the Mississippi, in the lake regions of America, sits a community of Ojibwe native-Americans. They are based, for the most part, in the three reservations, in the northern whereabouts in what is known as Minnesota. The reservations; Red Lake, White Earth and Leech Lake make up what must be the highest Indian concentration of Indian land, etc. in the United States. In the very midst of this lies the town of Bemidji (pop: 12,000).

So it was to here that I returned. A community I had passed through, back

in '82, when I was a young man, and back when I was on that longest road from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska. My quest, nothing less — was to find a People and a place with the gumption and grit to look for a philosophy that allows ALL cultures to thrive, and ALL children to be the best that they can be.

Of fundamental import, this educational reform, first presented in a paper of this Review, has been accredited to be of seminal importance. [US government: auspice Homeland Security, visa E11 “Extraordinary capacity.” This limited annually to the 300, or so, ideas (worldwide) that could - if implemented - change America.] That is ‘Democracy Reaches the Kids!’

Yes, all cultures can be, and for the first time, fully defended. That is, if not totally damaged by modern educational practice, then they can culture/language together, resurge. There is nothing else out there, in education thinking, which even approaches this broad and sweeping claim. Health to, is also returned to where it has always belonged, four square at the centre of a child's beginning journey through life.

The good news of northern Minnesota is most heartening: the ingredients are there! The language/culture surviving in the lake region was more, by a factor of 100, I would say, and could dare to hope. The tribe can survive, can resurge, that is if all the research aspects are indeed carried through. In those circumstances then it is not unrealistic to think in terms of cultural renaissance. Irony isn't it? For this author found AT THIS JUNCTURE much bleak despair, often unspoken, and widespread, overwhelming. Not surprising is it, for anyone with even a passing familiarity with Indian Country.

What brought me back, of course was the shooting at the school on the Red Lake Reservation. I felt it appropriate to further our students' excellent gesture of September 2005 when they made the 1,000 origami folded paper cranes. I determined therefore to courteously pay my respects to the Sovereign Reservation, and on the first anniversary of that tragedy, March 21, 2006. To do this I was taken the 26 miles from Bemidji to Red Lake by Red Lake native Mr. Joe Johnson (Indian advocate/liaison) and Lutheran Chaplain Mark Papke-Larson. Both work at the Bemidji Hospital, which was the first to receive the wounded, after the school carnage // Greatest single boy school killing in history {17 dead and wounded}.

2. PROCEDURE

Upon arrival I began contacting many of the distinguished professionals in the region, an early one was the Ojibwe language specialist — he answered the phone in

Ojibwe! His office sits in what is the finest building on the Bemidji State University campus - the Indian Resource Center. [It is here to note that my accommodations throughout were secured, and for minimal cost, via the special efforts of many staff and faculty, who went to great pains to help out, and without their support it would not have been possible to maintain activity away from my base, the *Fukae* campus, Kobe.]

2.1 RED LAKE SCHOOL

I arrived back at the scene — the Red Lake school.

Armed security was everywhere, reinforced and apparent. At noon a 'one minute silence' was held, order of the Governor of Minnesota. I was particularly honoured to be invited to join in holding hands in a formed circle. They remembered the summer, when they had kindly spoken to our students [Kobe U. / mixed faculties] A particular honour was to be one Ojibwe, who wore her Indian number tattooed directly onto her arm! Back in the 70s, she had been one of the participants to the Indian takeover of Alcatraz Island. I was therefore especially delighted to present to this fighter a poster from the last of the leaders of the time; Blackfoot Chief Lonewalker. He too had met with our students; that during our 2003 visit to the California Maritime Academy. At closing ten balloons were released into the blue sky, representing the 10 shot dead at the tragic spot. Before leaving I thanked the new headmaster.

During my flying visit I had good chance to meet a vigorous and caring person, a registered art therapist and councillor at the school, one of 6 I believe. These are rather unique in world education, and seem to be psychologically trained reinforcements to assist in the fraught business in teaching kids in the modern period. {Democracy education has another answer — returning to the joy and fellowship of learning!} While there, I tried to follow up on the medical status of the Red Lake children - we searched for a nurse - alas no luck. I was returned to BSU by a Red Lake teacher, herself formerly trained as a teacher at the university. (I'm thinking that it must zero, or close to, Red Lake natives teaching Red Lake natives.)

2.3 GETTING THE WORD OUT

As chance would have it I was given chance to lecture two classes in the foundation education programme that the teacher must have gone through. This was allowed to happen at all because of the warm support of the Chair and the Professional Education Department. He purchased this author's book! The chairman had taught in

Roehampton, England took me along to the professor-in-charge, This was a real honour as this faculty member, daughter of two wonderful illiterate parents, has had a life that was burned and burnished brightly. During the great civil rights era, our BSU heroine was imprisoned for her believe in justice. That was in Jackson, Florida. The kind of pluck and spirit led to her being led through the mean streets of Atlanta, singled out to meet Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior. History.

2.4 FILM

The documentary film with our student, active on Point Barrow, Alaska, at the end of the century was granted permission to be shown on campus. It's a crucial image captured; the USA senior agent down on knees to Apologize to the native people, and in such graphic terms as "... cowardly killing of woman children ..." The way to look at this, I feel, is as an official recognition that the elders through history, back to Contact that is, were largely right, and that the awesome power of a then nascent USA was by-en-large mistaken, often gravely and certainly lethally so. It is the first real step of healing. It is profoundly important.

The film, officially rubber stamped by the office of University Events and ads were placed on the 29 notice boards - 'officially' - allowed and dotted about campus. The show was put on at Bangsburg Hall and was part of a remarkable series choreographed by the director of Outdoor Programs. For the event I estimate close to 40 came, here reckoned a good turnout.

Many extraordinary people came, including:- A brilliant professor from Croatia, consultant to various UN offices and head of Croatia's Special Olympics, which led to here dining with the likes of the Bushes', the Kennedys.' Others, from the American Civil Liberties Union, a scientist just back from composition of the Universe type of conference in Houston, Texas; the founder of the Bug-0-Nay-Ge-Shig School; the senior partner of *Anishinabe* Legal Services. (He had returned that day having bid farewell his only son Alex, flying off to Iraq.) The director at the Paul Bunyan Playhouse. It was actually the lawyer above who had taken me to Sir Peter Shaffer's *Lettice and Loveage*, it's a it was a British play, you see. There were quite a few students, many more.

The life and death nature of this film was not particularly recognised. As was reported from Outdoor Programs, from the students perspective, "All the dashing about — seems so urgent; the mythically quality, references were all completely new to the students ... Great." There were no other reviews.

I purchased 50 DVD discs and BSU, Academic Technology, 'burned' them, free of charge. Many thanks.

As an example of the kind of fierce difficulty faced in setting up an experiment, another of the film show's dynamic participants was an Indian leader. He'd spent his time from middle school on, being beaten up by the white kids because he was an Indian. An the US penchant for bussing kids hither and thither was not point of bloody danger for him and his fellows. Not withstanding (or because of?) Today this gentleman displays levels of wisdom which make him potentially a great man. He took it on himself to take me about, introducing me to many, such as the head of the Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), a powerhouse of commonsense, shot through with the spirituality and wisdom of the People. He bought my book and touched his heart in a physically gesture to what it was I had done, or at least tried to do. At the Green Party — they brought me Japanese green tea — with sugar and milk! I also was introduced to the lead sculptor of the area she was at the old, and handsomely designed in its day, Carnegie Library. Her work stood outside.

"One in 162 American children," she said. "Are born autistic."

2.9 HEALTH

Health: I popped over to the BSU Department of Physical Education, Health and Sport. I raised here the grave and more-or-less totally ignored tsunami of diabetes, that the reservations are drowning in. It was thanks to the IEN Statement *On the Right to Food and Food Security* that the bandied number (85%) was in fact re-confirmed. That is diabetes on Indian Reservations.

"An epidemic," I wondered aloud.

"Pandemic," the health leader corrected. I tried another venue;

"Any change, since the shootings?" I asked the new programs director at the Boys & Girls Club. [One of her pupils had lost an eye in the carnage.]

"Looks like none," is what she said.

What about the politicians?

I was being shunted about by a scion of one of the old families of Bemidji. His family, Huguenots escaped France and via the UK found their way on to America. By 1908 it was Bemidji and the foundation of Woollen Mills, of which he was currently company president. We ended another day at a regular sort of US eating place; here he had wound up a local Democrat activist, some of my stuff contributed. "Just listen to, George." He impishly suggested her with a chuckle. She was sort of blow away;

“Nobody knows what to do about the schools and kids!” She rattled on of me doing meetings down in the twin cities with the (Democrat) House leaders. Get one over those dreadful Republicans. I later leant that my host was “The leading Republican in these parts.” No wonder he was happy!

When, another day, I was shopping for the DVDs it was he who introduced me to a gent;

“You know, he could call up the White House.” Now writing on the back of business card was the former head of the Red Lake Tribal Council, which in the US is really rather rare, a sovereign nation. After the chief it was over to the newspaper *The Bemidji Pioneer*. Another of his pals, the publisher. I noted the posters on the wall;

“My boys, one, he’s a golf pro, but not with Tiger.” I had been in touch with this newspapers editor. I had, over the phone, suggested to her that the anniversary of the tragedy shooting was a time to lookout for alternatives, something, anything, to lower the temperature in the world whereby such catastrophes occur. Make sense? If given a green light in Minnesota, I would aim to do the following:-

3. THE CHALLENGE

As a People America has “always had a faith that the days of our children will be better than our own.” [Pres. Carter, 1980] Our children are losing that Faith.

The huge waves of globalization which, in the recent past was called - though stretching it - Americanization, have been pounding on the shores of the abroad for much of the last century. Is it not astonishing therefore, that actually living within the superpower, though it be to the fringes, are the remnants of the tribes that once made up the original inhabitants of what some of then called Turtle Island. Imagine, anchored in the full force of that gale force of America, and hanging on for close on 500-years.

The situation today is however grim. Diabetes alone already has a firm grip and is a looming disaster. And the violence. According to IEN the shootings on Red Lake were notable, more by the numbers involved. One-off shootings (in the schools) are, he pointed out, “not uncommon; Indian violence against Indian ...” So, things then, surely edging towards a final end. It looks like slipping away without even a token fight.

So where’s the Hope?

4. HISTORY

Let's start with recent history. Do you know the very last battle, when the US Army pitted itself against the Indians was as recently as 1898. It was against the Ojibwe and it was the Ojibwe who won the Battle of Sugar Point!

At my film, I was presented another a folder, papers from the Minnesota Historical Society. I had earlier been talking, on his car phone, to the director of the Indian Affairs Council, who was presently down in the Twin Cities. I believe it was the director's great-grandfather, Chief Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig, who led-off on the historic engagement. The townspeople of Bemidji were so unnerved that they barricaded themselves into city hall! It should therefore be noted that the Ojibwe didn't wipe out all of the unit of the 3rd Infantry, but allowed a peaceful withdrawal. [Incidentally, the estimated casualties (17) are the same as the Red Lake school shooting.]

*"Then Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig straightened,
Drew himself up proudly, lordly,
Made this answer to the voices
Calling upon the winds of autumn,
Couched in terms full of defiance:
Will I come with you ..."*

*The Song of Bug-O-Nay-Ge-Shig
Walker Pilot, November 28, 1898*

Hope lies only in creating a momentum of hope, and change. Can the change be triggered? Difficult of course, but not impossible. This is how I estimate it could be done:-

5. CONCLUSIONS

1/ In an environment in which I have never met a single person who thinks the Native Peoples have a chance. {The "vortex of self-destruction" is taken as somehow 'normal' for Indians.} I would recommend canvassing all the regions native citizens with the question 'Do you wish to survive as an independent People?' An affirmative here would create a mandate, and begs the next question, 'How?' Unless change is secured for the kids then it is impossible. This must lead to debate on how to change.

That means Democracy.

2/ Meeting should be set up “all welcome” throughout the region.

First off: All elders would be decorated with academic robes and declared ‘Masters of Living Culture.’ This would expressly qualify them as teachers. I have been in touch with the folks over at Josten, one of America’s top outfits in the field. They happen to be Minneapolis based. The Public Affairs director there, Richard Spoebe, showed interest; indeed they had donated to Red Lake after the disaster.

Next every Indian adult, (and the kids!) would be asked;

“What is it that is estimated needs to be learnt by each Ojibwe child, to be an Ojibwe?”

[It must be noted that Democracy education can absorb any and most all of their suggestions. This would form a template, a clear framework and visible path to the future.] We can reasonably hope that spin-off from this initiative will eventually lead to the creation of jobs; that be bringing the rest of Indian Country up to speed on how, in Northern Minnesota, despair and violence was turned into a new way.

3/ Use the implicit promise of the USA. In its Apology they emphatically stated “Never again will we attack your languages, your rituals, your tribal ways.” Of course not! No da! They are doing exactly that, but it is not soldier blue that is the trouble, but school! You see, via benign neglect. If you don’t actively teach, or allow time for it to be taught, then any subject, be it geography or needlepoint, just withers on the vine. As I was informed me; “Jeff (the shooter) had said in his blog, something like ‘You never told me what it was to be an Indian boy.’” [My simple reform would do that, and in no uncertain terms. On Point Barrow we declared; “Native Peoples are the greatest survivors in human history.”]

4/ I would use the sovereignty asset. If they are ‘sovereign’ how come then the school has no native teachers?

5/ Diabetes - The fact that nationwide 1 in 3 babies born since 2000 are slated to get diabetes. Indian figures are way over this. I contacted the CDC in Atlanta. The full agency name is Center for Disease Control and Prevention. ‘Prevention’ is a part of their mandate. [On the KUMM student trip to California I also stayed with a couple,

British, and their daughter was a rear-admiral, second-in-command at CDC & P.] We had exchanged e-mails. There would be nobody visiting Red Lake.

This means that the Indians are essentially on their own. They must take the initiative themselves and that can only really mean change the system. It is noted that the late Coretta Scott King “walking several miles to school every day.” This long tradition, broken, can be returned too (or similar effort) as standard before thinking of anything else on school days.

6/ The trigger on this could be by connecting the school on Red Lake with my march through Bemidji in 82, that would bring back into play all the attendant world’s records, etc. We would march under the banner of the American Revolution.

Minnesota can steal a march, can lead; and Red Lake can have been the trigger.

7/ If all this, and the worst single kid shooting in history cannot suggest to the powers that be, to pursue another way of doing things then indeed all is lost. The other name of this initiative, and of profound respect to the Native Peoples, is ‘Hope from the Land of the Polar Bear.’ Like the Polar bears, in the far north, now in so great a peril, swim also the native cultures. Without change they too would also drown.

“You know,” I was pointed out. “This little town - Bemidji - has five Olympic medals.” I had been over with the curlers, they’d pulled off a bronze at *Torino* (whom I had been introduced to.) I’d even chucked a couple of ‘rocks’ making a fool of myself while the new Olympians looked on. It was Bob again picking me up, shivering, outside the Deerwood Bank. I thankfully opened the door to his semi-wrecked Ford.

“Six!! I told him.

You see, I had just finished meeting a guy inside — Oh, my God! The Olympic champion! A big moment for me! A member of the greatest US hockey team ever who beat the unbeatable CCCP, just after they had walloped the NHL All Stars, 6-0. Phil and his young USA team mates. (average age 21) went onto become Olympic champions. {See the Hollywood film *Miracle*}

“Miracle? Some people say that” he said, more to himself. Graciousness itself the Olympian accepted the book dedicated to his fellow Olympian, Norman Vaughan. Could this man, also of inspiration, and of miracles also inspire the People to their own miracle?? As I left he said after me;

“Let me know.”

"The Navaho were 90% with their language," explained the director, handing me the novel he co-wrote *The Savage American*. "15-years later, down to 35%." {I recalled my meeting in Alaska, Chief Marie Smith Jones, the very LAST speaker of the Eyak language, going down to zero %.) As a Red Lake native, the director, went on to become the first ever elected on the first ballot to the Presidency of the National Congress of American Indians. He was also the youngest ever elected. It was he who had raised the \$2.5 million to build the American Indian Resource Center, of which he now served as director. We had our picture taken together and he set about hunting down the Red Lake's famous wild rice. A student had come across this, on the internet. Rice, a cultural indicator and close to the heart of the Japanese, should be of interest!!

Lee, sent me along to the main-hall where an Ojibwe language competition was in progress. Wonderful! They were fighting to save the language, against a tsunami called America. He said; "Our knowledge, in the old days was based on tradition, history and grammar." {Perfect, I thought. Fit right in with the Democracy reform.} However, what caught my eye was lunch. Set up was not the wild rice of Red Lake, but standard high school fare, standard American style; a stack of boxes, pizza and cake. And imagine: this was for these high school kids of which 80/90% being overweight/obese. And are not Native kids known to be more prone to diabetes? The system paid no attention to these manifest life and death facts. None what-so-ever.

The standard norm however is killing these kids. This is way the urgent task must be to change the pattern of this unhappy and now deadly system.

6.CONCLUSIONS

As we end this report we can ask: Can Minnesota lead the way? Return to the spirit that made this beautiful state in the first place. Can Minnesota think to try something different, and shift their children to safer, higher ground ...

... Or do we leave them exactly where they are. Under the reluctant 'care' of a system where teachers are them self unhappy, for they no longer are allowed to be the teacher they once dreamed to be. As buried as the kids, under the control of unhappy educrats. Remember, they have no philosophy, only a system that is increasingly estimated by so many to have failed. For example, is it really a teacher's job to supervise the columns of children as they shuffle-by to receive their "medication?" And in some cases at least, so that the little ones can sit through the lessons that have no benefit to them, nor the world beyond. You see, it is considered normal. It is the edicts

and paper schedules from on high that count. Well, isn't it? So let's just give them the next slice of pizza. Loving those treasured kids - the future of us all - is saying "No" to that next slice of pizza and saying yes to each and everyone of them becoming the best that they can be!

To set up the experiment is the overriding necessary function. To even reach that point - and that level of trust - we will first need an open and honest debate for the there to be even a future for ALL Native Americans. The basis for the debate should be the foundation research from the Fukae campus. Thank you.

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