

Opportunity Missed?

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About a year ago, my son, my son-in-law and I had occasion to be in Washington, D.C. and, finding ourselves with an afternoon free, thought it would be worth while to see the Museum of the American Indian that had been newly opened on the National Mall. An interesting four story building designed to give the feel of a "distinctively native place" as one of its brochures puts it, the Museum is located between the Capitol and the Air and Space Museum - an ideal site to attract the millions of tourists and others who come to Washington each year. I'm not sure what we expected to find in the Museum. Being of different generations, what we had been taught about Indians differed, and our expectations of what we would see in the Museum differed as well, but whatever our suppositions, we were disappointed. None of us felt he had learned much of interest or value about Indian culture from his visit.

Our greatest surprise was to find the Museum centered almost entirely on what was represented to be contemporary Indian life, with very little relating to the origins, history or cultures of the Native American peoples as Europeans found them when they came here. For example, a prominent area was devoted to the way ice fishing is done by a present-day tribe living in Canada. The exhibit shows men working from a specially engineered tank-like vehicle, complete with two-way radio and mechanical ice drilling equipment. It was obvious from the Western technology they were employing how different these contemporary Indians' way of life was from that of their forbearers. We felt the same way about the Museum's other exhibits; that they portrayed only today's remnants of Indian culture, the life lived on reservations, which no longer has the qualities of their peoples' lives before the devastations inflicted by the white man.

There were also displays of wood carvings, paintings, pottery and jewelry made by contemporary Indian artisans, with examples of these offered for sale in the Museum's shops. These seemed to us neither authentic Indian art, nor, for that matter, art by any aesthetic standard. Large space was allocated to cases of jewelry being manufactured by Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell. Designs of Campbell's jewelry, while bearing Indian motifs, were of his own devising, and since they did not come out of any of the tribal cultures that had been extant here, we wondered if the space given him was not due more to the fact he was a Senator when Congress appropriated the 219 million dollars it cost to build the museum than to any real connection to Indian culture.

We did see some valuable Indian artifacts encased around several walls with dates spanning more than 2000 years. However, these were not put in context and we were soon benumbed by our efforts to derive anything from this hodge-podge of isolated items. We felt this was a great loss, for many of these articles exhibited a creative force that we could see expressed true things about the cultures that had produced them, unlike the products coming from the craftsmen who were purporting to produce "Indian" art today.

There were also a few displays intended to show Indian spiritual beliefs and cosmic views, but these were so fraught with attempts to idealize Indian life, that they seemed more missionary than real to us.

As we were leaving, a young woman doing interviews asked us to give her our impressions. She seemed taken aback when my son said he was disappointed. He asked her why the Museum offered nothing about the early migrations and so little of the histories of the tribes before and during their encounters with white settlers. Her answer was that contemporary tribes do not believe there were migrations, but rather that their first ancestors sprang from the land, and that it was the Museum's mission to conform to what today's tribal leaders wanted to be displayed there.

As we walked away, we talked about our disappointment in not finding the Museum more instructive. We were aware that we knew little about the real life of Native Americans and that Indians were seen by us as stereotypes. My own first notions of Native Americans were formed when I was a boy. Like most boys, I played cowboys and Indians and the Indians were always the "bad guys." The movies of my generation confirmed this negative convention. I can still call up the image of those storied wagon trains of pioneer families moving West to settle new land, only to be met by hostile Indians. The scene of the circled wagons, surrounded by whooping bloodthirsty savages, remains in living memory for many of us growing up in those years. How we thrilled to hear at the last desperate moment that distant bugle sounding the arrival of the Cavalry, and to see John Wayne riding hard across the plain at the head of his command. The intrepid Duke soon had those murderous savages biting the dust! Few, if any, of us thought of how racist these portrayals were.

Young people of my generation weren't always led to think of Indians as villains. We had our idea of the "good" Indian, and his name was Tonto. We tuned into the radio faithfully to hear him ride with the Lone Ranger into the moral fray. To this day, I cannot listen to the William Tell Overture without also hearing the Lone Ranger's echoing cry of "Hi, Ho Silver, away." As I listened week after week to Tonto help save the day, it never occurred to me that the day he was saving was always from the ethical perspective of the

White Man, or how condescending it was to portray Tonto as content to live in the shadow of his superior. When a boy, all this seemed eminently right to me, given who Tonto was and who the Lone Ranger was.

Few Americans have ever sought seriously to understand this Continent's indigenous people. Consequently, our knowledge of Indian life remains remarkably ill-informed. This is not due only to the fictions we have created about the Indian, but also to the fact European settlers systematically destroyed the native cultures they encountered, making the true facts about them hard to recover. For the most part, our forbearers approached Indians with an attitude of disdain and cared neither to understand, nor to preserve, knowledge of their ways. Respect for Indian life might have interfered with their aim, which was to take Indian lands for themselves. Settlers, and the governments representing them, found what moral justification they needed for this in the self-serving proposition that whites were civilized Christians while Indians were pagan savages. In the white man's view of things, it was their God-given right, even duty, to drive the Indians from the land. It was ultimately, they said, their "manifest destiny" to settle the entire continent, freeing it from the "evil" the Indian's presence allegedly represented. President Andrew Jackson's Farewell Address to the Nation is illustrative of this attitude. This is what Jackson said about the removal of Indian tribes from states in the South as he left the presidency in 1837:

"The states which had so long been retarded in their improvement by the Indian tribes residing in the midst of them are at length relieved from the evil, and this unhappy race—the original dwellers in our land—are now placed in a situation where we may well hope that they will share the blessings of civilization." [emphasis added]

The "situation" referred to here, that in which the Indians were placed so they might enjoy the "blessings of civilization," as Jackson put it, was their forced removal from the Carolinas to reservations in Oklahoma. Sent on a trek of more than 2000 miles, an overland journey that has come to be called the "Trail of Tears," many died of hunger, disease and exhaustion on the way.

Bereft of their ancestral homes, made dependent on promised subsidies the government often failed to provide, uprooted even from the new places they were accorded when white settlers wanted more new land, or discovered valuable minerals in areas previously reserved, one can hardly wonder that those Native Americans who

managed to survive the ravages of the white man's diseases, his steel and gunpowder, and the alcohol addictions he induced, failed to recognize those "blessings" of "civilization" Jackson so condescending said he was dispensing to them. Indeed, given what governments before and after Jackson did to them, it is a wonder the Indians survived at all with any part of their culture remaining to them. Few American whites were put out of countenance by this. The prevailing mantra until well into the 20th Century was that "the only good Indian was a dead Indian."

In the 1950's, when I was a history major in college, and later a graduate student specializing in American history, the westward movement of white settlers was being presented in our history books as triumphal. Histories written then started from the premise that the American Republic was the noblest nation the world had ever known. America was presented as the embodiment of democracy, freedom and technological progress. Yes, historians might mention in passing that we had pushed the Indians off the land, but, after all, it had been our manifest destiny to do so. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., the recognized expert on Andrew Jackson, was able to write his Pulitzer Prize-winning history, The Age of Jackson, without any mention of Jackson as an Indian-hater or of the "Trail of Tears." Indeed, so unimportant were Native Americans to his view of our history, Schlesinger has no entry at all for Indians in his book's index.

By the 1970's, this consensus of our history as triumphal began breaking up as a school of multiculturalist historians emerged. Blacks, women and the poor, people that had been largely discounted in the telling of our nation's story, began to have their place in it, Indians among them. As valuable as the multiculturalist movement has been in giving us deeper insights into, and new perspectives on, those people prior history books had tended to leave out, this, I believe, has tended to curdle into political correctness, which has acted in its turn to impede our search for the uncolored truth. In the case of the Indian, he has gone from an image of the squalid savage, to that of an idealized figure - the "noble savage." My son who was with us at the Museum that day, grew up in this later time when the popular view of Indians was to romanticize them, and as a boy, he found interest and inspiration in the noble qualities attributed to them by this later stereotype.

To give an example, for some years now, there has been a copy of a speech circulating that is attributed to Chief Seattle, a leader of the Suquamish tribe in the American Northwest, a speech my son learned to recite by heart. It is said to have been made on the occasion of the ceding of Seattle's tribal lands to the U.S. Government in 1854, and is presented as an expression of Indian views of the land and of nature generally. Here are some excerpts from the speech. Some of you may have heard them

before:

"The President in Washington sends word that he wishes to buy our land. But how can you buy or sell the sky? The land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?

"Every part of this earth is sacred to my people: Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect. All are holy in the memory and experience of my people.

"We know the sap which courses through the trees as we know the blood that courses through our veins. We are part of the earth and it is part of us.

. . ."The wind that gave our grandfather his first breath also receives his last sigh. The wind also gives our children the spirit of life. . .

"This we know: the earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself.

These grave words eloquently express what is said to be Seattle's people's reverence for the earth and their sense of oneness with it and with each other. As I've said, Seattle's speech has been quoted widely, especially by environmentalists who are alarmed about our western industrial society's exploitation of natural resources for commercial gain, with its urban sprawl and degradation of the planet. Vice President Al Gore quoted this speech in his book, Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit, and Joseph Campbell read it to thousands of TV viewers during his Public Television interviews with Bill Moyers.

These words may indeed express the way Seattle's people felt about the land, and their perceived relationship to it. But it seems Seattle never made the speech in the words attributed to him today. Research done by anthropologists reveals that while Seattle made a speech at the treaty signing in 1854, it was not reported until more than 30 years after the event, it having first appeared in a Washington newspaper in 1887. Research shows also that this first newspaper rendering was

changed and enlarged several times over the years until, in 1971, a Texas script writer for a Southern Baptist radio program on ecology rewrote the previous versions to produce the speech we have today.

If Seattle did not actually give this speech as it appears today, does what it says nevertheless convey the sentiments of his people? It would be useful to know this, and would be something from which we might learn, for the speech expresses a very different attitude toward the land, and to the world generally, than we have in the West.

N. Scott Momaday, a scholar, university professor, Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, and himself a full-blooded Kiowa, has written of his people and has offered interesting contrasts between them and us in their views of themselves and of the lands they occupied. He suggests, as does the speech said to have been made by Seattle, that if we, as white men, want to understand differences between ourselves and the Indian, we might start by considering the differences in our respective cultures' relationship to the land. We conceive of the land in terms of ownership and use, as a medium of exchange to be bought and sold. According to Momaday, this way of looking at the land was alien to the Indian. He did not objectify the land and seek to possess it as we do. That is, he never thought of the land as an object to be owned. Rather, he experienced the land, and felt a spiritual relationship to it.

Momaday distinguishes his forbearers from us in another related way. To them, nature was a universal continuum in which they were inextricably included. They identified themselves intuitively with the outside world. They felt nature "mothered" them into existence, and they saw themselves as an integral part of it. He asserts their way of relating to nature gave them an integrative sense of themselves and their communities that we in our Western culture lack. That is to say, Indians did not divide the world into separate particularized objects as these present themselves to the outward looking eye, but sensed by instinct and imagination beyond this to what for them was a truer sense of themselves and of reality. To think he was sundered from his oneness with nature and his community, for the Indian, would be seen as delusional. According to Momaday, Native Americans saw into things in a visionary way that made them feel undivided psychically; undivided from themselves, undivided from their environment, and undivided from their fellow creatures. This sense of oneness made the Indian feel culturally secure and quintessentially alive to himself and to all around him. To illustrate what he says about what he calls the Indian's "visionary power," his way of seeing into nature, Momaday gives this scene of an old arrowmaker as he goes to perform the prayer ritual of his ancestors:

"The old man walked slowly to the place where he would make his prayer. It was always the same place, a mound where the grass was sparse and the red earth showed through. He limped a little with age, but as he planted his feet, he grew straight and tall and hard. The bones showed fine and prominent in his face and hands. His face was painted with red and yellow bars under the eyes. Not sharply defined on the dark skin, but soft and organic, the colors of sandstone and pollen. The long braids of his hair were wrapped in blood-red cloth. His eyes were deep and open, and looked far out over the plain beyond the distant hills. At the precise moment of sunrise his eyes caught fire, then closed, having seen. As the light descended over him, he lifted his voice in his prayer, where it entered upon the silence of the morning, and was carried there, like the call of a bird."

Now I do not know whether Momaday attributes more in the way of intuitive and visionary power to the Indian than is justified by the reality, but I would like to know, for if true this would be something important we might learn from him.

Since at least the period of the so-called "Enlightenment," we in the West have proceeded on the premise that our reason, and its handmaiden science, are our surest roads to knowledge. Empiricism is our guide. We envision ourselves as apart from nature and pitted against it. Science begins by accepting only the facts, that is the observed phenomena, of the outside world, as evidence for its determinations of reality. It proceeds by accurate measurement and description and follows the demands of our objective reason, and not our subjective feeling. This reliance on our human intellect alone for our determination of what is real has tended to diminish our respect for the intuitive and spiritual sides of our being. If we cannot prove a thing empirically, then, we say, it cannot be believed to constitute reality. It seems to me the emphasis Western culture has placed on this way of approaching the world has been reductive. It is certainly true that our reason and our science have led us to useful knowledge of the physical operations of things. Still, what science can teach us is but a portion of what we can know. And we might ask why is it that while, at the same time we have gathered ever more scientific information for our minds to dissect and anatomize, we have found ourselves less and less in touch with the wholeness of things and with each other. It is in this area of the intuitive, the intimate, the affective aspects of our humanity that Native Americans may have the

most to show us.

Our artists, especially our poets, dramatists and visual artists have been warning us for a long time that we in the West are becoming "hollow men" living in a "waste land" of our own making; that it is our lot today to feel fragmented and cut off, and haunted in our exile and solitariness by the presentiment of a lost condition of wholeness and community.

It should be a warning to us, I think, that Carl Jung concluded from his clinical studies that Western man lacks psychological completeness and is in danger of losing a sense of real significance in his life. Jung believed that many he found to be neurotics in our Western culture would not have been so had we lived in a more integrated way so that nature was truly experienced and not merely observed from afar, and had we been more connected to our fellow creatures and not so self-centeredly isolated from them. Had this been so, we might have avoided the divisions he found within us and in our society at large.

Believing that our Cartesian sense of separation from nature and from each other was a self-created delusion, a delusion not shared by more primitive peoples, Jung studied these cultures at the beginning of the 20th Century, and in the course of his work, came to America to go among the Indians of our Southwest to try to better understand from them what human qualities we might be losing by our Western view of the separate self. While among the peoples of the Anasazi culture, he developed a friendship with an old Pueblo Indian called Mountain Lake. Mountain Lake expressed his view of us to Jung. Here is what he said about what he saw as our restless discontent:

"We don't understand the whites. They are always wanting something, always restless, always looking for something. What is it? We don't know. We can't understand them. They have such sharp noses, such thin, cruel lips, such lines in their faces. We think they are all mad."

The Oglala Sioux holy man Black Elk, in telling to the poet John Neihardt the story of the whites' destruction of his nation, and with that destruction the spiritual life of his people, made these comments about us:

"I could see that the whites did not care for each other the way our people did. . . They would take everything from each other if they could, and so there were some who had more of everything than they could use, while crowds of people had nothing at all and

Wordsworth, as did many other writers and poets before and after him, believed that what science can measure is only a portion of what we can know, and that if we rely only on what he called our "meddling intellect" for our notions of things, we could extinguish this kind of intuition, this capacity for vision that comes from human feeling rather than from the reasoning mind.

Virginia Woolf said she experienced a sense of reality akin to this as well when she allowed her idea of a separate self, to be lost in the natural world around her, experiences she called "moments of being." Here is what she wrote in her diary about her intuitive sense of reality:

"[I] got then to a consciousness of what I call 'reality': a thing I see before me; something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest and continue to exist. Reality I call it. And I fancy sometimes this is the most necessary thing to me; that which I seek."

To return now to the Museum, it was apparent from what we saw and what we heard from the young woman seeking to interview us, that leaders of contemporary Indian tribes have the dominant voice in what the Museum displays and the programs it offers. The Museum defends its aim to satisfy tribal advisors on the ground that they are better qualified to tell the Native American story than are cultural historians, anthropologists, archeologists and other trained persons. But is this true? Should it be the surviving tribes, those who still claim Indian culture as their heritage, or the Museum itself, who should tell the story of America's indigenous people? It might seem an arrogance for a white man like me to suggest that trained professionals could know more today about Native American life than those who claim to be still living it. But the fallacy in this is that today's Indians no longer live in the ways that made the cultures they say they have inherited what they were, and their memories of those cultures have been largely lost, and where not entirely lost, distorted.

Hundreds of different tribes with different cultures were scattered across the North American continent when Europeans first came here. They did not have written languages. Their traditions were handed down orally. During the time of the westward movement most of the tribes were exterminated by the white man's diseases and massacres. It has been estimated that by the beginning of the 20th Century only a few hundred thousand Native Americans had survived. Those who did survive were uprooted from their homes and forced to live on reservations in new ways that were alien to them.

The oral traditions by which they had lived were disrupted, and lost through the passage of time. From the beginning the government tried to force Indians into the white man's mold. For generations they were prohibited from practicing their rituals, reciting their legends, singing their songs, and even from speaking their languages. Natalie Curtis, one of those few who saw the historic and spiritual value of Indian culture, and went among the tribes to record their songs and legends, found many of these already lost to them as early as 1900.

And there is another problem with letting today's tribal councils control the programs and exhibits of the Museum. Native Americans who want to find and preserve the authentic aspects of their cultures are complaining that many of their tribal leaders have seen an opportunity to commodify Indian culture by packaging it in attractive ways to make it salable. Indian artisans are producing jewelry, rugs, blankets, pottery and other items they represent as true expressions of Indian life which are no more than fake goods made to sell. As I've said, these are finding their way into the Museum as representative of Indian life and "art." The same is true of Indian ceremonies and powwows staged at the Museum and elsewhere where the songs, dances and costumes have little more relationship to true Indian culture than did the Indian acts of Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows.

I recognize that there are issues inherent in the question that involve more than just who is the more qualified to control the Museum. One might argue, I suppose, that it is more important to compensate the surviving tribes by giving them control of the Museum, and thus to assuage in this small way our guilt for what our forefathers did to their ancestors, than it is to assemble the true story of Native American history and culture. It seems to me to say this, however, is to disparage authentic Native American life and to show a lack of respect for what it has to offer all of us, Indian and white alike.

It is, or should be, the function of a museum to preserve and interpret the past so that the past might inform the present. Museums are our primary voices of the past. If all of us, including Native Americans, are to learn from the Indian story and culture, then this has to be the true story and not idealized fictions or merely today's Indians social and economic conditions, and ritual practices.

We are inevitably bound up in the Western society that surrounds us. We are immersed in it, and tend to accept its givens, if not as ultimate truth, then as the best truth available. The "other," the way he thinks, and how he experiences the world, too often either remains unknown to us, or is approached with preconceptions that blind us to his reality. More than ever today, we need to open ourselves to the perspectives of those

"others." As things stand now, it seems to me The National Museum of the American Indian has been an opportunity missed; let's hope that it will not remain one that is lost.