

Black Hills

Get serious or hit the road

Richard Grow

1985

Dear Fifth Estate,

In your June, 1985 issue [Letters, FE #320, Spring, 1985] Lev Chernyi joined the Big Mountain discussions and described an uncomfortable experience at the 1980 Black Hills Gathering. Chernyi was also responding to previous letters to the *Fifth Estate* which complained about some of the messages of the article on Big Mountain which I wrote last year. In that article I had referred to the necessity for “respect for the elders” and other guidelines on how to get along, as a non-Indian, when visiting Indian lands.

These implied “imperatives” offended the freedom-loving sensibilities of some of your readers who sensed authoritarianism in the wind. The 5th *Estate* invited response to the letters, asking for reality checks on the cause of the “respect” message. In its most common form, “respect for the Elders” usually means simply to listen to them.

There is a clear need for “guidelines for appropriate behavior” (all irony intended) especially for use by persons of European descent when visiting with the Indians. This need becomes readily apparent to just about anybody who visits with some of the old time traditionals, and who manages to quiet the bullshit noise in their minds and their mouths, even if just for a few days.

I have been working with the Indians for some number of years now as a White person willing to take responsibility for getting the White man’s government off the backs of the surviving Native Americans.

I came to working with the Indians as a life-long libertarian who had put in time with the hard right, hard left, ecology, feminist, post-patriarchal this and that and whatever other kinds of folks were working for change. Searching for lost black familiar sheep I stumbled into the Southwest and discovered there were whole clans and tribes of people there still living the old ways albeit under the guns of the U.S. government, literally.

I didn’t go to the Black Hills in 1980; the Gathering sounded too “appropriate techie” for me, though the proposal of “land based politics” caught my mind. Hippy friends reported back, describing some of the tensions around rock ‘n roll dope and so on, but also all the new possibilities opened up by the Gathering. As I got it, some rather freaky people of various colors managed to recognize each other. Probably needless to say that I found Russell Means denunciation of Marxism (as another obsolete European technology) refreshing, though widely condemned as politically incorrect and needlessly divisive in this time of oft-pronounced “unity.” (See FE #304, December 31, 1980 for the text of Means’ speech, “On the Future of the Earth.”)

Following the Gathering the returning Red, White and Black folks wanted to keep getting together, so the AIM house threw its doors open for biweekly potlucks and we started meeting. Indians told their stories, we told our stories and after a few months the Indians asked if we were done using them for entertainment and would we please get serious or hit the road. Ground rules were simple: those of us who wanted to be of any assistance to the Indians needed to recognize that help is on the terms of the people being helped. This didn’t mean on AIM’s terms, it meant that those of us who wanted to stop the forced relocation and death of several thousand Navajo needed to travel to and visit with the Navajo and listen to what they said they needed.

While this seems simple, the fact is that the main surviving European tradition on the continental U.S. is to either help yourself, or help somebody else get what you think they ought to want. The point was that “helping” the Navajo get anything other than what they determined were their needs was no help at all, but was simply another White missionary trip which leaves the missionary feeling holy and the Indians another step removed from their own lives.

White folks should, of course, feel free not to “help” the Indians, or the thousands of Navajo facing forced removal and “premature” death resulting from that removal. There’s nothing new about standing by—this removal is of the same scale as the Trail of Tears Cherokee removal of the 1830s and it’s going on today. There’s nothing new about living on the blood of the land, a land mistakenly “discovered” by Columbus and then subjected to a colonization and apartheid system differing from South Africa only in its advanced state of development.

There’s nothing new about White folks coming onto Indian lands (i.e. every bit of the Americas) carrying books for the “benefit” of the Indians. Makes no [difference,] never-mind whether you are the Christian missionary of the 1800s, the RCP cadre of the 1980s or the windmill salesperson of the New Age.

Last year I sat at Big Mountain, as usual just blown away by the magnificence of the Old Women, and watched the young Rainbow people, totally oblivious to the idea that ceremony is particular to place, playing with their crystals at the Sun Dance arbor. After this had gone on a few days one of the young Dine (Navajo) talked to the Rainbow in what I have come to see as the typical Southwestern Indian way of giving “criticism.” He didn’t tell them they had messed up, but instead talked of how he had spent several years preparing to learn the way of the crystal, but that he was still not ready. Then he mentioned that the ways of handling the crystal were a matter of some importance to the Elders and especially to the Medicine people, and that the casual handling of the crystals by the Rainbows was causing some discomfort. Message delivered, received, nothing heavy but it was quite serious, the crystals were put away.

White people, in their typical arrogance had decided for themselves that they knew what they were doing, and were practicing their own “ceremonies” on the Sun Dance grounds at Big Mountain. It is the experience of the Indians that abuse of ceremony causes real destruction; they understand the Bomb as an example. When the people dance the Sun Dance at Big Mountain they know that the U.S. has repeatedly slaughtered Indians for their religious practices, the most famous, but not unique, instance being the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890. And they know that the U.S. is panicked about the resurgence of the Sun Dance over the past ten years, and they know that Big Mountain and the ten to sixteen thousand people living around it face a certain early death if the U.S. removes them by the July 8, 1986 deadline.

My first couple trips to Indian land I talked a lot, asked a lot. Any outsider truly interested in learning something new can tell pretty quickly that they are better off if they just shut up and pay attention for a while, and maybe then decide whether they even know what they want to do, ask or say. For sure there is a steady undercurrent of racial tension. For sure there is a surplus of macho bros enjoying their “nationalism.”

Do we really expect a people facing the literal extermination of their Old People to go quietly into the night? How liberal of us. These people are under the gun, they face the end of their way of life every day, and there will always be some of them a bit over the edge. A war zone is not the best place for non-Indians with fragile egos to visit. Worse yet is the happy-faced presence of outsiders who insist on not knowing there is a war going on, wishing to proclaim the unity of one and all, while the one who’s Red is dying.

A basic contradiction between the Native peoples of the world and their invaders is the difference in their understanding of the relevance of “place.” Not surprising that the invaders, in their lust for land base, furiously deny the religious, spiritual, cultural and physical importance of the particular holy lands of particular indigenous peoples. The dynamic of this contradiction has changed not one bit over the past several centuries.

Chernyi feels put out by the lack of an “open microphone” at the Black Hills Gathering. Echoes of the missionary. And the lack of encouragement for “unapproved self-organization;” has Chernyi even tried to understand the reality of self-organization which is still practiced by the tribal peoples of the Americas, despite the centuries of invasion by missionaries and other conquerors? Frustration at being unable to spread “unapproved literature.” If only the Indians had practiced this security several centuries earlier.

Too bad Chernyi was so unsettled as to finally be only aware of being the “only conscious person...in the middle of an...audience...completely unaware”. I know people who organized the Gathering, others who went to the

Gathering and others who worked and spoke at the Gathering. Hardly zombies, hardly folks who left “their critical faculties at the gate.”

Rather: people who are quite critical of the present situation and who live out their critical attitude in a serious way knowing that their lives are on the line. Their lives are on the line because Reagan and his bros are determined to eliminate every last reminder that we are living on stolen land, land that has been abused and which is rejecting us every day, land which is soaked with the blood of its caretakers.

Until we settlers learn how to live on this land, we'll continue to abuse it, our loved ones and our children. I haven't heard a discovery by an environmentalist, a peace freak, feminist, new physicist or any other revolutionary that I haven't also heard from some Old Woman down on the land who got the same thing from listening to the land and to the Old Ones. Present day White discoverers all remind me of Columbus. What was in Chernyi's pamphlet? Who knows how to live on this land? How much longer will they be with us? Maybe we should listen now, maybe we should put our bodies between them and the bulldozers so we can listen a little longer? The stories they have to tell are quite something.

Respect doesn't mean submission. It doesn't hurt to put the pamphlets away for a bit and just listen.

Those who want to aid the resistance at Big Mountain should contact The Big Mountain Legal Defense/Offense Committee, at 124 N. San Francisco, Flagstaff, AZ 86001 (602) 774-6923) or The Big Mountain Support Group at 1412 Cypress, Berkeley, CA 94703 (415) 841-6500).

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