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Forty Years and Counting

Greg Sarris

I want to answer three questions that Ken Lincoln asked in the introduction to his book. Where have we come? What have we learned? And what lies ahead? I did a little research, and I found that there was a charter in 1970 that says:

In 20th century America when the white man's folly has finally caught up with him in a spoiled land and a polluted environment, nothing less than revolutionary change in all phases of life will provide the leadership necessary to undertake the recovery which must occur if the Indians are to save themselves from their white friends and the short comings of the dominant society. Convinced of this basic premise, of a rational regeneration we believe a small part of that change may be stimulated and perhaps even directed and evaluated with the establishment of a viable, flexible, effective and meaningful American Indian Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles.¹

Those were heady days. I remember Alcatraz. I was in high school in Santa Rosa, and it was a very tough thing back then because we were all claiming and staking out territory, and we would go down to Alcatraz, and it was really disconcerting to us because there were a lot of people from the American Indian Movement (AIM) movement there, or the beginnings of the AIM movement, and they were claiming it on behalf of American Indians, but they told us we California Indians were all Mexicans. We found that a little disheartening.

I remember those days quite well. I wasn't yet at UCLA, but those were days of once again taking over the territory, finding ways to get territory,

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finding ways to make room for ourselves. We—all Indians—had to knock on doors. We had to find friends, people within the university who would be sympathetic, who would advocate for us. The goal in those days was to empower ourselves, to protect ourselves and enhance our well-being. Here at the university during those early days we tried to establish a department but ended up with an Organized Research Unit. We established the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*. I think Ken began editing it in 1975, if my research serves me correctly. We did get a few Indians including myself here, but it was early and it was tentative at best.

Did we learn anything? I would rather change that part of the question and ask what are we still learning? At that time we learned that we could succeed. We learned that we could talk to one another. That in the best possible situations we can have meaningful dialogue. But, at the same time, we also learned what I tell my students and friends, that when you go to bed with somebody, you actually go to bed with their whole family, culture, and history. Then you start finding out what it's really about, and suddenly by the time we got to '75, '78, '80 we found that we'd been living together for a while. We started finding out certain kinds of things, we started getting frightened in certain ways, we started reconfiguring the fights in certain ways and territory wars in certain ways. What we became plagued by was the old history of them and us. You know what happened five thousand years ago; three thousand years ago it began to be documented—a people got displaced from their homeland. They were promised by their God another place, a better place. Somewhere along the way, as they were roaming they got the notion that they were chosen, and that motif began to spread and spread so that everywhere you had people conquering other people, and, in turn, this kind of toxic combination of a promise for a home place and the notion that you're chosen became not only toxic, but it became contagious so that everywhere every group that got dominated in some form or other replicated it and kept replicating it, and it has much to do with how we think and what is so much a part of us.

The first piece of legislation enacted in California in 1850, which was the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians, legalized Indian slavery here. Indians became the rightful property of whoever's land they were on in California. That law was not repealed until 1868, three years after the Civil War. During that time, one of our older men, Richard Taylor, had been taken down into the central valley and had a relationship with some of the disciples of Wuvoka. This was way before Wuvoka moved into the plains. Richard Taylor came back, and he preached the notion of regeneration. He had a dream. If they gathered all the people in seven round houses on Clear Lake, the Earth would flood in four days and the white people would be wiped away. The animals and the ancestors would come back. All of the Coast Miwok,

Pomo, and Wintun people around Lake County went there and danced for four days. What happened in the end was that it rained and rained, and, of course, it quit raining on the fifth day. We were surrounded by the US Army, who suspected an Indian uprising. There were two thousand of us there, and they lined us up to shoot every one of us, and, luckily, an ancestor had a piece of paper. Her name was Nolem Karia. The paper said we're the rightful property of John Sutter, and, as long as Indians were property, they didn't get shot and you would not get in trouble.

So they dispersed the group, and what grew out of that was our Dream Dance and Bole-Hesi movement, and it preached a fierce nationalism. While we had to work for the white man in the round houses, we preached the white man was the devil. It was said that you will not have an afterlife if you have anything to do with the white man. In Lake County, there was the practice of infanticide of mixed-blood children. So what happens is a fierce and unreasonable nationalism. You can understand, after basically 98 to 99 percent of us had been wiped out, the need for a strong identity or regeneration. The problem is you get caught in that trap and suddenly you're delegitimizing those within your own ranks. Those who have white blood or any other kind of blood are the devil. That kept happening for us. For my father's generation, white was right, and then we come along and start changing and want to be Indians again. I remember as a kid they used to say, "Say you're Spanish, say you're Mexican, you can pass." Then AIM came along and then said, "You're too light, march in the back." We keep delegitimizing those within our own ranks. It's us/them, them/us. It becomes the way we know the world. Homelessness and fear become endemic to our thinking and our way of life, and, as some of you know, we create it in our own homes, in our own tribes. It's something we have to work against. The whole thing will continue to undermine us, and I think that again if we have any healing to do, it's the need to create a new story. A story of home, where we're no longer afraid, where the motif isn't us/them, you/me but again all of us. We have no choice now.

I would just like to take a minute and redo, if I may, that statement again, that part of it they say from the charter: "What might lie ahead is to provide the leadership and thought necessary to undertake the recovery which must occur if Indians are to save themselves from their white friends and the shortcomings of the dominant society."² Our discussions of ethnic pride, what's right, and whose territory, are going to seem like silly little tea parties under a hailstorm if we don't get our thinking right. I'd like to change the above statement and say we need here and everywhere to provide leaders and thought necessary to undertake the recovery that must occur if we, all of us, are to save ourselves from ourselves and the shortcomings of the dominant story. That's where we need to move.

Here, and in all parts of our lives, whether we're in medicine at the university, history, law, politics, the fight that we must fight in all aspects of our tribal personal, institutional lives is a me/you/us/them motif—a motif based on fear, power, oppression, and greed—we must change the motif to one of understanding and comfort and power that enhances sustainability and not separateness and ultimately destruction. Our mandate for the future is to come home to be home. That's where we need to work. We don't have any choice; we can't play these games much longer. If we do care about the old ways, we must find ways to practice them. The old world isn't here, and if you want to send the Europeans back to Europe—well, you'd have to cut me in half and keep half of me here. We can't do that, but what we can do together is once again use that old ethic and aesthetic of place and home to inform everything we do to be a barometer of what we do in each area that we study. I know when I came here to UCLA, I was somewhat nervous, I was not a good student, and certainly in high school I was not the most likely to succeed. I would have come to UCLA right away if my grades would have let me. I didn't really read a novel until my junior year in high school, and I admit this to inspire all of you young people and old people here. I remember the first novel I read was Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, and I felt sorry for the fish, and that was not the English teacher's desired response. Indeed, a very inauspicious beginning for an English professor.

I went on to Stanford, and the battles were pretty awful. I was in the writing program there, and I remember a professor saying to me, "Who are these people you are writing about? You're never going to publish these stories." He was used to seeing Indians on Appaloosa horses chasing Bambi or something. Of course, the irony was that my people were just ninety minutes north of Stanford, where I grew up. I did what a lot of frightened writers do; I became a professor and got a PhD. The minute I got a job I started writing and publishing, and to show you that there is a Great Spirit watching us, my publisher refused that professor's last novel and gave me a lucrative two-book deal. Then a guy named Robert Redford wanted to make a movie, an HBO series. But then once again I found myself in territory wars, fighting. I had to fight Hollywood's idea of Indians.

I also continue to fight for my tribe. In 1992, there was a tribe north of us that was federally recognized; my tribe was not federally recognized. We were illegally terminated in 1958. We were given land in the earlier part of the twentieth century, as many California Indians were, a small parcel of land. In California, they didn't name us by tribe. They named us by area. The law said for the so-called homeless Indians of Tomales Bay, Bodega Bay, Sebastopol, and the vicinities thereof, you get 15.5 acres on a hillside in Graton, and that's your reservation. You will have sovereignty. You are, de facto, a nation. Well

that was good until 1958—the California Indian Termination Act came along, which was basically an updated version of the Dawes Act. It gave Indian people here in California the option to own their land privately in exchange for their sovereignty and status as Indian people in the eyes of the federal government. Two federal agents came to our reservation in August of 1958. In that month we were picking the crops; we were actually picking pears in Healdsburg at that point. There were two old men who did not know the law very well, and these agents came up and said, “Would you like to own your land?” Well to the couple of older Indian guys who didn’t fully understand the implication of what the agents were proposing, that sounded good, so they signed, and when we came back from picking pears we found that we had lost our land. We lost everything with it, our sovereignty, our rights.

In 1992 there was a tribe that was recognized, and it was down in our area and was going to build a great big casino with Japanese backers. It was my first year at UCLA. I was an assistant professor. The last thing I needed to do was get involved in this, but it was the first thing I should do. I did. I called the people back together. We got together and called ourselves the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, and for eight years we petitioned and did everything we could to, again, get the federal government to address its wrongs. Finally, on December 27, 2000, President Clinton signed the bill that I co-wrote, restoring our rights, recognizing that the federal government lied and cheated. They returned our rights and our sovereignty. They promised us land, but, of course, they didn’t say they would buy it. We tried for two and a half years to do organic food processing; even Tillamook cheese wanted to do a cheese factory, but the thing is they want you to give the money and the land. Well, we didn’t have the money or the land. So then the “C” word began to be bandied around in 2003 and my non-Indian mother said, “Greg, you cannot leave the people now. There’s too many good examples of bad examples of tribes getting ripped off, bad lawyers, bad business deals. You’ve got to make it the best you can do. Stay with them.” With a PhD in modern thought and literature, the last thing I wanted to do was begin negotiating a deal, but my people come first. My mother made me feel extremely guilty and so did all my Indian relatives. They said, “You need to continue helping us.” I negotiated a good deal for us with Station Casinos.

We wanted in our business opportunity to create something that would benefit Indian and non-Indian alike, and that is what we’ve done, working within our Indian community and with the non-Indian community.

We—many Indian tribes—have power now with our business opportunities. Things are changing in many ways for us. We can say what we want. We must do that. But we must do that to break the old patterns of us/them in everything we do, and truly create a livable world for all of us. We must rise

and be the example, drawing on our time-old values to inform everything we do. We must create an institution and programs that rewrite the old non-Indian story so that we can work together for a new story to come home. And finally, perhaps, find that elusive thing: peace. Thank you.

NOTES

1. Regarding the charter, Kenneth Lincoln affirms that “a statement came out of the student protests of the spring of 1970 for establishing an American Indian Studies Center at UCLA.” E-mail message, December 15, 2010.

2. Ibid.