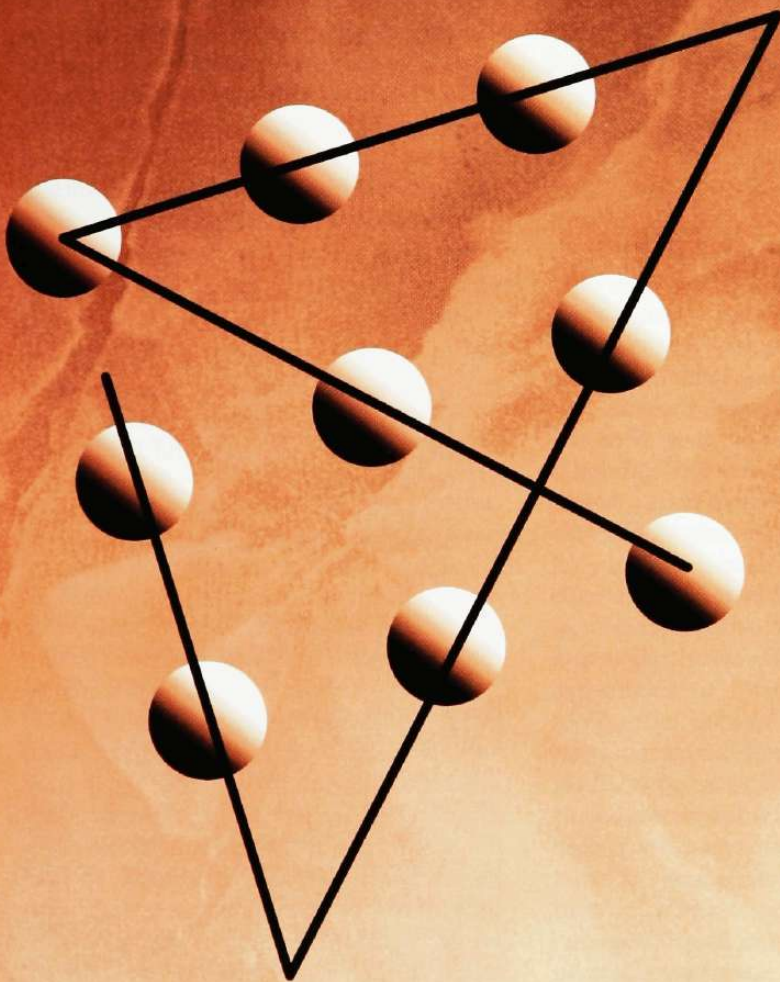


Exploring

MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

in History



Rhoda R. Gilman

Rhoda Gilman is the author of The Story of Minnesota's Past (1991) and numerous articles on the fur trade.

In the Spring 1992 issue of *Minnesota History*, David Larsen, the former chairman of Minnesota's Lower Sioux Reservation, asks a pointed question:

Have you ever tried the game where you have nine dots in a square, three to a row, and you have to connect them with only four straight lines without lifting the pencil? You can't do it unless you get outside of the box. When I talk about spirituality and history and culture, you will also have to connect all the dots. You can't do it unless you get outside of the square. Unless you let your mind move beyond this box that education puts us in.'

'David E. Larsen, "Some Native Thoughts on the Quincentennial," *Minnesota History* 53 (Spring 1992): 28.

By education Larsen means, I believe, the modern Western mode of thinking, taught from kindergarten through graduate school. We have come to regard this method as the universal road to truth, whether in science, mathematics, economics, sociology, or history. To us it represents a rational, scientific attitude: Logic as opposed to intuition. Trusting the mind as a detached observer of events. Replication of results. Documented fact as opposed to myth. We have reconstructed our own view of the human past within that context.

I first became aware of the box back in 1971–72, when the Minnesota Historical Society's education division began working on *The Ojibwe: A History Resource Unit*, published in 1973. The research and writing were done by staff members, but every word, every picture, and every nuance of interpretation was discussed with an all-Indian advisory committee. Discussed and quite frequently rewritten!

We on the staff wanted to reinterpret Ojibway history in a manner fair to Indian people. We would, of course, avoid calling them "savages" and treating them as part of the natural scene, as has been common in American history books. Going beyond that, we would portray them not as passive victims of history but as individuals with purposes, plans, options, and initiatives of their own. Since a real history of the tribe had never been written, we knew we would have to search for information in a multitude of scattered and obscure sources. Much would have to be dug out from between the lines of biased white accounts. Then we hoped to bring it all together in a coherent way for young people of both European and American Indian heritage. In fact, we did achieve all that and have reason to be proud of the job. It is good history. Indian people still like and use it twenty years later. But for the most part, it is not *their* history.

At the very outset we hit a stumbling block: What was the origin of the people who call themselves *Anishinabe*? Ethnohistorians agree that before French contact there was probably no such entity as an Ojibway tribe. The people were there, of course—small bands living in the harsh Laurentian Shield country to the northeast

of Lake Superior and north of Lake Huron. They spoke an Algonquian language that showed close relationship to the Ottawa, the Potawatomie, and the Cree. Early Frenchmen identified some of the bands as belonging to the latter two groups.

A number of these bands gathered each year to fish at the falls of Sault Ste. Marie, and eventually they coalesced into a loose political and social unit. The earliest French name for them was *Saulteurs*, referring to the Sault, or falls. This was the story we chose to open the unit, but our advisors immediately objected.

Most Ojibway accept the account recorded in the 1850s by William Warren, a mixed-blood member of the tribe, who was educated in white schools. He received the story from respected elders, and it agrees in a general way with oral traditions preserved by others. Warren wrote:

While our forefathers were living on the great salt water toward the rising sun, the great Megis (sea-shell) showed itself above the surface of the great water, and the rays of the sun for a long period were reflected from its glossy back. It gave warmth and light to the An-ish-in-aub-ag. . . . All at once it sank into the deep, and for a time our ancestors were not blessed with its light.²

Warren goes on to tell of how the Megis reappeared to the west in the St. Lawrence River, only to sink from sight and appear three times more, in Lake Ontario, at Sault Ste. Marie, and, finally, at the place now known as Madeline Island near the western end of Lake Superior. The mystical Megis is symbolized by a cowrie shell, and Warren explains that in the story it represents the Midewiwin.

Some ethnohistorians suggest that the Grand Medicine Society, like the tribe itself, may have taken shape as a creative Ojibway response to European diseases and French Jesuits, both of which challenged the long-established religious rituals of the people. The Midewiwin, they

²William W. Warren, *History of the Ojibway People* (1885; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), 78.

suspect, was a cultural flowering that probably began at Sault Ste. Marie and reached its peak on Madeline Island. It quickly became a pan-tribal movement.

So would we follow the ethnohistorians or the Megis? W. Roger Buffalohead, a member of our advisory committee, suggested that we include both stories and explain that they are secular and sacred versions of history. This proved to be a workable solution. How much different, after all, is it from the way modern historians usually treat the Bible?

But as we kept on working through the unit, I began to see more of that box David Larsen talks about. Underlying the onward march of events was always the assumption that, tragic as it might seem, the Indians' way of life was doomed. Why? Because Europeans had bypassed them on the cultural ladder. We had developed a superior way of thinking. The evidence for that lay in technology, social organization, population, and sheer power. Our perception of all history was humankind's slow climb to the summit of Western civilization.

That was the assumption our ancestors brought to the conquest of "undeveloped" peoples, both in the Western and Eastern hemispheres. It was their moral excuse. "Progress" up the cultural ladder from simple to complex, from nontechnological to industrial, seemed inevitable. Even those with a tender conscience felt certain that in the long run this progress would benefit all people.

In American history there is the additional assumption that it was our unique destiny to weld a unified nation from many diverse parts. Separatism could never be tolerated. We fought the Civil War to settle the issue. Can we argue, then, that it might have been possible for Indian people to retain separate cultures shielded by different laws and loyalties within the American context? Is it possible now? Larsen meets that question head-on

also. He says: "I know what I am. But you want me to stop being that, and you want me to become something you have made up." An American.³

There are even more subtle problems than these implicit in a multicultural approach to history. One lies in the way we view time and reality. No one has put it better, I think, than historian Robert Berkhofer: "Formal history presumes that there is one basic, external, and real flow of events in the past-as-once-lived that can be fitted into one story about that flow. This formal history also presumes that events exist apart from the interpreters' minds, so the story seems to be told as if from an omniscient, godlike view that can be considered objective and impartial." Cultural pluralism, he goes on to say, "challenges all of those premises."⁴

Time. Reality. The Sacred. These bring to mind a confrontation I once witnessed between an archaeologist and an Indian over the investigation of an ancient burial, a grave some three or four thousand years old that had been accidentally disturbed. I will never forget the look of horror that flashed across the archaeologist's face when the Indian adamantly rejected investigating the burial before reinterring it. I saw that look, because I felt the same horror in my own heart. To those of us bred in the Western intellectual tradition, nothing is more sacred than knowledge. To destroy it forever is the closest we can come to outright sacrilege.

To the Indian, the antiquity of the grave had nothing to do with the question. If the Spirit exists in the present, and if time is essentially cyclical, the passage of one year or a thousand is equally immaterial. And if time is not linear, knowledge of the past, though possibly interesting, has no crucial value in telling us who we are or where we are going. But if one sees time as a line of never-to-be-repeated events, each giving rise to the next, then one looks to the past for an explanation of the present and a sense of direction.

Indians often demand: "How would you feel about digging up the graves of *your* ancestors?" The answer, of course, is "Fine." In Europe there is no hesitation about investigating the past in this way.

³Larsen, "Some Native Thoughts," 27.

⁴Robert T. Berkhofer, Jr., "Cultural Pluralism Versus Ethnocentrism in the New Indian History," in *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, ed. Calvin Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 40.

Take the bog people, found during recent years in northeastern Germany, Denmark, and Britain, some apparently the victims of human sacrifice. That is precisely the part of the world my own ancestors lived in, and there is a clear possibility that those leathery bodies preserved in peat are relatives of mine. I find them doubly fascinating for that very reason. My curiosity, reaching back across the linear span of two thousand years to those dim pre-Roman times, is an expression of respect and carries a sense of kinship. By learning about them, I know more about myself. In a distant way, the lives they lived are what shaped me.

Like Berkhofer, historians Calvin Martin, Richard Drinnon, and Frederick Turner have examined these fundamental contrasts in perception. Drinnon observes: "With our objectified Time, we historians have hidden the cyclical world of myth under our linear writings and have thereby robbed tribal people of their reality." And Turner writes: "The aboriginal view sees that our necessary human condition is to be a part of the total living universe, that we cannot be anything other than part of this gigantic organism."⁵

In 1980 Turner published a book in which he argued that neither economic nor demographic factors but a profound spiritual emptiness caused western Europe to turn outward in eight hundred years of savage conquest, beginning with the Crusades and ending with worldwide colonialism and destruction of the environment. In the Western Hemisphere, he says, Europeans had an opportunity to reestablish an ongoing mystical relationship with the natural world, but they missed it. They were blinded by a religious tradition focused exclusively on humankind and on the special sacredness of their own history.⁶

The work was reviewed by Francis Jennings, himself a distinguished revisionist of American Indian history. "This eloquently maudlin book might fairly be retitled 'Beyond Reason,'" Jennings sniffed. "The word for this in English is [not history but] theology." He was not altogether wrong. When one deals with fundamentals like time and world view, one quickly moves into metaphysics. As Vine Deloria has observed in *God is Red*, "Christian religion

and the Western idea of history are inseparable and mutually self-supporting."⁷

Like it or not, our history *is* theology. Or if one prefers a less loaded term, call it an artifact of our own culture. As Calvin Martin says bluntly: "We historians need to get out of history, as we know it, if we wish to write authentic histories of American Indians."⁸

American Indians are not the only groups to pose a challenge. The *multi* in multiculturalism also refers to the varieties of African-American and Hispanic cultures, many Asian cultures, and a number of others.

Like American Indians, most indigenous peoples across the globe incorporate within their view of the world and their own history a sacred relationship to the forces of nature and to other species. The dominant cultural traditions of India and eastern Asia, as expressed in Buddhism, present still a different view of time, nature, and reality.

To a Buddhist the world of time, space, and matter is an illusion created by the mind. Illusion or not, of course, we live in this world and have to deal with it. According to this view of life, though, history, whether cyclical or linear, has little meaning—except, perhaps, as an illustration of human folly. Exercise of compassion and justice, combined with systematic observation of one's own mind, offers the hope of eventually freeing oneself from illusion.

Thus, in the Buddhist context, historical or even scientific objectivity is only self-

⁵Richard Drinnon, "The Metaphysics of Dancing Tribes," and Frederick Turner, "On the Revision of Monuments," both in *American Indian and the Problem of History*, 111 and 117.

⁶Frederick Turner, *Beyond Geography: The Western Spirit Against the Wilderness* (New York: Viking Press, 1980).

⁷Francis Jennings, in *American Historical Review* 85 (Dec. 1980): 1252-53; Vine Deloria, Jr., *God is Red* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1973), 127. My own review of Turner's book, challenging Jennings, appeared in *Minnesota History* 47 (Summer 1981): 252-53.

⁸Calvin Martin, "An Introduction Aboard the Fidele," in *American Indian and the Problem of History*, 15.

delusion. If the mind shapes what it perceives in the present, it does so doubly in reconstructing the past. This should not be taken to mean that accuracy in observation and careful record keeping are useless on a practical level, but they will always be filtered through the observer or record keeper and can never reflect absolute truth—if, indeed, there is such a thing as truth apart from the mind that creates it.

Twentieth-century physics and mathematics have lent new credibility to Buddhism. Science has revealed the world of our senses to be only one level of reality. On another, time and space are the same; what we see as solid matter is composed of energy moving at inconceivable speeds; and light may be composed of particles or waves, depending on the circumstances under which it is observed. The solid Newtonian concepts of time, space, and matter on which the linear view of history rests have been destroyed, yet western thought has not incorporated this change into concepts about the world, people, and history.

In the same way, the environmental crisis confronting us has drawn radical ecologists to look with new respect at the beliefs of indigenous peoples. While the ecologists may have idealized or romanticized some of these beliefs, they have also made the point that a society living in harmony with its environment may be successful in ways that are more important in the long run than technology and growth. This raises the possibility that a choice between the alternative social directions of conformity with nature or conquest of it is a value judgment, not an inevitable response to forces of evolution.

Meanwhile, the end of European colo-

nialism, chaotic changes in power and political alignments, and migration, forced and otherwise, of vast numbers of people—not to mention a revolution in gender relationships—have all made the traditional Western view of history seem narrow and parochial. The godlike, ex-cathedra voice that purports to be objective history sounds hollow and irrelevant. We must listen to many voices and many histories.

Does this mean that the Western sense of the past no longer has any value? I don't believe so. When this kind of history lives up to its own terms with real integrity, it has much to offer the world as a tool for understanding the flow of events. Recognizing its limitations as an explanation of the human condition will only increase its value.

Looking, for example, from Split Rock Lighthouse, history appears in several dimensions. We can see the pride and power of those who built American industry, the challenge of men and steel to the dangers of the great, cold lake. We can see the daunting journeys of those who came before in fragile fur trade canoes, spanning distance and time that today is matched in human terms only by space travel. But we must not overlook the Indian canoe, perhaps paddled by women and children, in the sheltered bay at the foot of the cliff. And we must try to see the lake as Indian people saw it—a place forever sacred. It was alive with other beings and held the mysteries of life and death in its depths. We cannot afford to treat those beliefs as quaint and credulous. We may find that they symbolize forces we have yet to face ourselves.



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