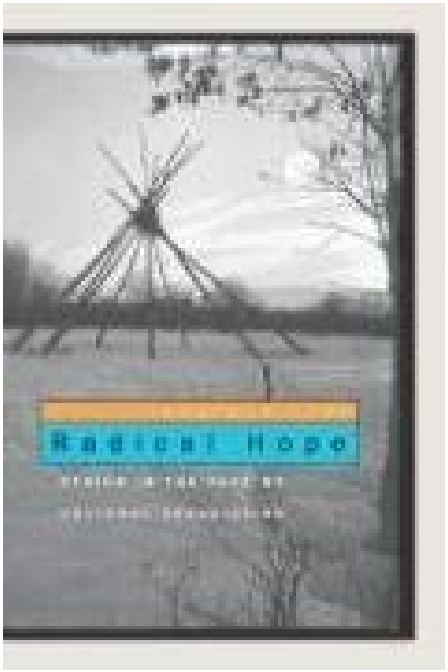

Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation

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Shortly before he died, Plenty Coups, the last great Chief of the Crow Nation, told his story up to a certain point. “When the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground,” he said, “and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened.” It is precisely this point that of a people faced with the end of their way of life that prompts the philosophical and ethical inquiry pursued in *Radical Hope*. In Jonathan Lear’s view, Plenty Coups’ story raises a profound ethical question that transcends his time and challenges us all: how should one face the possibility that one’s culture might collapse?

This is a vulnerability that affects us all insofar as we are all inhabitants of a civilization, and civilizations are themselves vulnerable to historical forces. How should we live with this vulnerability? Can we make any sense of facing up to such a challenge courageously? Using the available anthropology and history of the Indian tribes during their confinement to reservations, and drawing on philosophy and psychoanalytic theory, Lear explores the story of the Crow Nation at an impasse as it bears upon these questions and these questions as they bear upon our own place in the world. His book is a deeply revealing, and deeply moving, philosophical inquiry into a peculiar vulnerability that goes to the heart of the human condition.

Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation Details

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From Reader Review Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation for online ebook

Martin Rowe says

This beautiful and resonant book struck many chords with me. Not only does it demand that you, the reader, reflect on the lessons that we will all have to learn as we move deeper into a century that will very likely ask us to cope with changes caused by a warming planet as devastating and unforeseeable as those that affected Plenty Coups and the Crow nation, but it has made me want to go back and examine my connections to people I've known—particularly Wangari Maathai (about whom I wrote in THE ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM)—to see if, in some ways, she wasn't the Plenty Coups for her own people.

The author's deep engagement with the Crow people, the boldness of his argument and yet the modesty of his presentation, and fundamentally the kinds of claims that he does NOT make as much as those he does, render RADICAL HOPE a refreshingly open, readable, and stirring book of moral philosophy. If the book feels repetitious, it's mainly because the author wants to be absolutely clear that his central concern is how the experience of cultural devastation MAY have felt to the Crow, and HOW Plenty Coups interpreted the dream presented to him for the future of his people—not WHAT happened or whether Plenty Coups was correct to interpret the dream in the way he did. Some might feel this to be an overly narrow view, and yet I found it to be profoundly persuasive and frankly moving and revelatory: for, Lear suggests, all that may remain to us in the future is the power of the imagination to keep open options in the face of catastrophe and a wholly different world in which everything we know no longer contains meaning. Simply a wonderful book that I cannot recommend highly enough.

Kathleen O'Neal says

Jonathan Lear's beautifully written and thought-provoking book "Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation" is a fascinating philosophical exploration of a rarely discussed topic - how should we as human beings lives against the backdrop of the possibility that the civilization and cultures within which our lives and our sense of their meaning is embedded? The book was a joy to read from start to finish which is saying something fairly meaningful given that most works by analytic philosophers published by academic publishing houses (books such as this one, in other words) are often very difficult to enjoy as a pleasurable reading experience. The book's success as literature is largely due to Lear's decision to explore his book's topic through the lens of a fairly narrow meditation on the life of a now deceased Crow Indian chief known as Many Coups. Recently I have been reading and reading about psychobiography and while Jonathan Lear is not a psychologist or psychiatrist and does not use the term "psychobiography" the book can in many ways be seen as such a work and a very convincing and successful psychobiography at that, at least given its modest aims and limited scope. Lears draws on his substantial background in Freudian and psychoanalytic theory throughout the course of his work and the book is much richer for it. However, this narrow focus on the choices of a specific individual in a specific and unique historical circumstance is perhaps the biggest strike against this book as a work of philosophy. With the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to gloss Plenty Coups as a wise leader who did the right things at the right times for himself and the nation which he was leading. However, it seems to me more likely than Lears appears to me to think that it is that although Plenty Coups was apparently a fairly savvy and resourceful individual and a good political and social leader for his people, a great deal of his success depended on sheer dumb luck. Furthermore the ways in which Lear valorizes Plenty Coups for responding to the challenge of cultural destruction which he faced may not be possible or even appropriate to all such individuals or communities facing cultural destruction. I also think that there is a stronger case than Lear seems to think that there is for problematizing some of the ethical

features of Plenty Coups's response to his situation and for giving credit to American Indian leaders who chose different courses at the same time that Plenty Coups was leading the Crow people.

First of all, I want to commend the book for packing in so much new and (at least to me) original ideas in the course of such a small book. The topic itself is original and thought-provoking. Lear also makes the excellent choice to start his narrative with an enigmatic and fascinating anecdote about the life of Plenty Coups which grabs the reader's attention instantly and also frames the central issues which Lear's book will seek to tackle as the narrative moves forward. Lear's elucidation of the concepts of radical hope, the human being as a finite erotic subject, self's relationship to the ego-ideal, and poetry as a broadly construed way to make meaning are interesting and important.

My criticisms of the book, however, are primarily due to its over-reliance on a contestable interpretation of one person's life in one unique historical and personal situation. Without looking at responses to cultural destruction as it has impacted other groups of people in history such as the Jewish and Roma communities during the Holocaust, the Western world's LGBTQ community during the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the African diasporic community in the wake of slavery, the upper class of the white American South after the American Civil War, or men in the Western world after the advent of feminism, to take a few examples, it seems difficult to accept without further argument the notion that any of Lear's ruminations on historical devastation and how to handle it can be generalized to speak for all such situations.

I also think that Lear too easily dismisses the notion that Plenty Coups's decision to lead his tribe in cooperating with white Americans against other American Indian tribes was an unproblematic one. At the very least, I think such a topic deserves sustained engagement with the view held by many reasonable people that the American government's attacks on the civilizations of the American Indians was a form of mass murder and the extreme violation of human rights. By looking at the situation as thinkers such as Ward Churchill or Andrea Smith do (and while their way of seeing the situation may not be the only plausible interpretation of it one must admit they they are certainly among the most compelling and plausible interpretations of the problems white Americans have created for American Indians), one could quite reasonably argue that Plenty Coups collaborated with evil by capitulating too easily to the demands of European-Americans.

I highly recommend this book but I also think that it is a book which should be read critically, not just in terms of assessing whether or not what Lears says is plausible or correct in light of his narrative but also in light of the silences in his text which result from a lack of serious engage with situations in which the actions of Plenty Coups may have been unfeasible or inappropriate as well as reasonable challenges to the behavior of Plenty Coups in his own context. In this book, both what is said and what is not said are thought-provoking and important topics.

Emma says

There's something about this book that reminds me of a podcast -- it goes into depth on a single person's story, explores their context and what followed them, and then explores larger ethical, spiritual, and epistemological implications of that story. As a fascinating book to just read, it offers a fascinating story followed by really thought-provoking consideration of not just how we make meaning in the world, but how we are able to make meaning (and later understand it).

Peter Landau says

What do you do when your culture no longer exists? That happens to me every day. As I grow older my life feels less relevant to the culture writ large. I’m pushed into a dead end, watching everyone move on without me. Boohoo. But what about if everything I knew, everything everyone knows, was taken away. Could you live with that? How would you live in a world in which has been erased, all you have learned to survive is irrelevant? In RADICAL HOPE: ETHICS IN THE FACE OF CULTURAL DEVASTATION, Jonathan Lear explores this unfathomable event, which in fact happened to Plenty Coups, chief of the Crow tribe. Through what Lear calls radical hope, the Crow chief found a path through the impossible that wasn’t blind optimism but an active embrace of the unknown. It’s a lesson we can all learn from.

Kyle van Oosterum says

While this book does make use of philosophy, psychoanalysis, anthropology and much more (studies of knowledge that I find fascinating), it is far too bogged down in the details of its primary case study: the cultural devastation of the Crow Native American tribes. I would have enjoyed this book a lot more if its titular concept "radical hope" - defined as 'hope that is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is" - was explored without the allusions to repetitive historical and anecdotal evidence. That being said, if you find yourself interested in every detail concerning the lives of Plenty Coup and the Crow people then this will certainly be the work for you because it is highly thorough, analytical and insightful. Personally, I would have preferred to explore the subject of 'ethics in the face of cultural devastation' with a touch more abstraction and a touch less about laying down 'coup sticks'.

Laura Howard says

In many ways, exactly what a philosophical text should be--grounded in real events, focused on real people, and interested in real application of ideas. A humble, accessible, and important little book.

Alina says

This book is extraordinary in how short and rich it is. It is rich in ethical truths and the one philosophical truth, which I believe, is the most important truth for any person alive to understand. This is not an overstatement. I will first summarize Lear’s work and return to these truths.

Drawing on Heideggerian existential phenomenology, Aristotelian ethics, and Freudian psychology, Lear examines the ways by which the Crow nation managed to “survive” through colonial devastations. He first provides a vivid illustration of the Crow way of life before colonial invasions. Then he shows that the key practices and social roles of this way of life are dependent on various ecological and cultural conditions, which were destroyed over a relatively quick succession of US military and political events. After the loss of these conditions, it was impossible to engage in these practices or embody these roles. As consequence, members of the Crow nation lost their way of life and world. They had no more ideals to strive for. Their notion of happiness and the good life were now incomprehensible, given these changes in conditions. The generations that witnessed this shift were devastated and confused, and newer generations who never experienced the former way of life were alienated and lost. Although these people physically survived and

engaged in the everyday practices to continue physical survival, they faced a cultural death, which is phenomenologically tantamount to an extermination of value and meaning in the world, or exile from a familiar world.

Lear’s choice of the Crow nation’s history is a deliberate one; the sorts of philosophical insights are most impactful if drawn from a concrete and real-life example, and the Crow nation is striking for how quickly and intensely it underwent cultural devastation. These insights hold true for all human beings and cultures, but they are only revealed in rare extreme cases. For example, Lear beautifully examines the ethical value of hope. He shows that in even in the face of the impossibility to continue a way of life, and in the universal loss of meaning, the stance of “radical hope” is still a live option for us. Radical hope is the conviction in that there will be some future goodness that is unintelligible from our current standpoint. We are hopeful that we can work through this alien environment, and through this unpredictable struggle, we will gain new practices, norms, and values that can constitute a new realm of intelligibility in which this currently unknowable goodness can be achieved. Lear shows that the Crow people were able to have radical hope; he does not pursue this analysis, but clearly people in other sorts of extreme circumstances of loss and trauma are also sometimes capable of embodying this ethical stance. Ultimately, Lear powerfully shows that for all of us, the significances of our everyday world and our personal identities are contingent on ecological and cultural conditions, whose status and stability is beyond our control. This fragility is our human condition. It is humbling and inspiring.

I strongly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in trauma/transformation, existentialism, and virtue ethics. More broadly, this book is valuable for anyone who simply aims to cultivate the sensitive attitude that is necessary for approaching experiences that are radically different from one’s own. Lear’s writing is highly readable, and the reader does not need a background in philosophy to appreciate the philosophical insights in this book.

Undrakh Ganzorig says

What would you do if everything you believe and your nation aspire to is gone? The wall that used to protect your culture, tradition, and ethics has fallen down. You and your people are now standing against the unknown world with full of threats and enormous changes. Can everyone be enough courageous to confront such disaster? Plenty Coups, last great chief of Crow nation, managed to get his tribe go through the hardest period of their entire history. In Radical Hope, Jonathan Lear explains how Plenty Coups' acts were wise and full of courage thus enabling the tribe to have a chance to thrive again.

From now, I'll see two animals differently than I did before. First one is buffalo. That fluffy, hairy, and clumsy looking animal had much more value and meaning to Native Americans' lives than any of us can imagine. When the last buffalo went away, Crow's nomadic life following the buffalo herd was gone too. Another animal is Chikadee, a small bird who listens to the all, stay quiet, and makes the wisest decision, which was Plenty Coups' strategy for the awaiting future.

Every culture has values, ideals, honor system, and internal organization. Even though I know nothing about the academic/theoretical points of view, I could feel what factors are crucial to keep the culture alive! I'm gonna write a report for the history class and add to my review. So the review for the time being ends here :l I think it would have been more interesting if i had some fundamental knowledge about Crow Tribe or ethical issues.

Marie says

This is a book mining the effects of cultural devastation from the point of view of one Native American Indian tribe - the Crow of Montana. It is an interesting premise, and well thought through, but should have been just a long New Yorker type article. The author is very repetitive, and as a philosphy professor, the book is kind of hybrid between accessible by lay audiences and being academic. My book group got a good 1 and half discussion out of it though - better read if discussed with others.

Pepe Martínez says

Como lo dice su título, el libro hace reflexionar y tomar posición ante los retos del cambio acelerado que hoy estamos viviendo. Lo hace a partir de la mirada de la devastación cultural que vivieron los indios americanos, en particular los Crow. Hace una crítica al optimismo simple, y nos habla de la confianza, la apertura a escuchar y el coraje. El libro genera esperanza que es posible tomar posición y vivir la vida con convicciones, en tiempos en que las antiguas categorías ya no nos orientan. Nos señala que tener coraje, es saber que nos avergüenza y que nos genera temor, es contar con un propósito hacia el cuál caminar, a su vez está sintonizada con la situación en la que se encuentra, y es en la experiencia donde encuentra los fundamentos de sus juicios, el coraje implica estar en riesgo, estar dispuesto a tener pérdidas, y por último entender que el coraje no es lo mismo que el optimismo. El coraje supone contar convicciones, las que están vivas en la comunidad. El coraje es la capacidad para vivir bien con los riesgos propios de la existencia humana, la persona que cultiva esta virtud (el coraje)es maestra en vivir la vida comprometida con otros, de manera de estar en el mundo con nuestras propias debilidades y vulnerabilidades. @ooh

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Karen Celano says

It's rare that a philosophy book can bring me to tears, but the first chapter of *Radical Hope*, in its description of the shattered souls of the Crow people in the wake of cultural devastation, was wincingly painful. Admittedly, Lear does not pretend that his description of cognitive disarray actually represents what the Crow endured; he acknowledges his inability and unwillingness to describe their true psychological states, instead choosing to perform a philosophical "thought experiment" based on their culturally embedded historical reality in order to contextualize his analysis. But his description rings true enough, and it is horrifying.

Though the book (somewhat disappointingly, but maybe necessarily) never answers this question within its pages, I find myself asking what would constitute a similar level of cultural devastation for us today. Drawing on anthropology, Lear writes that a "vibrant culture" is characterized by "established social roles," "standards of excellence associated with these roles," and "the possibility of constituting oneself as. . . one who embodies these ideals." By those standards, I think American civilization would fail the test of having a "vibrant culture." American culture could described as thin precisely because it is lacking in those shared cultural norms - yet the irony is that thick cultures are probably more prone to the sort of devastation Lear describes. (Indeed, Lear implies as such when he writes that, in the event a civilization should collapse, it would the most “flourishing” members – the ones most embedded in its value structures – that would be least able to cope.)

Indeed, I wonder if Western civilization has chosen, through its exaltation of relativism, tolerance, and

diversity, to adopt cultural thinness (with its porous cultural boundaries and social fluidity) precisely to avoid such vulnerability. Lear writes that teaching people to conceive of the possibility of their culture's demise is "counterproductive" as it undermines faith in the reality of one's culture, but we Americans are actually very good at conceiving of our culture's demise: just consider all the dystopian novels and films we produce. The irony is that, though we're protecting ourselves from cultural vulnerability, we're also somewhat deliberately (though perhaps unconsciously) thinning out our culture even more, introducing skepticism about its value and worth.

Some people consider may consider this a good thing – we are increasingly thinking of ourselves in global terms, as "human beings" and "individuals" rather than "Americans" or "Westerners," and there are even questions among some about whether our civilization "deserves" to survive at all. But we do have to look at the effects such a thinning out of culture may have on those within it. Lear's description of how some Crow lived and spoke of their experiences on the reservation remind me of how some commentators have described the mentalities of those who descend into opioid addition: without a *telos*, without a conception of the "good life," without a sense that their life has any significance.

But of course, Lear's book is entitled *Radical Hope*, and in his second chapter he grounds this hope in that which gives a culture both its stability and its openness: faith in transcendent goodness, what the Crow called Ah-badt-dadt-deah, what a Christian would call God, what a secular person might see as the potential for goodness that is still of this world though it transcends our current understanding. This goodness is what gives us hope for the possibility of a "dignified passage across the abyss" even if we don't understand what that passage may entail. This hope in transcendent goodness is what remains firm both before and after the passage over the abyss and is what enables cultural continuity.

Lear rarely uses the word "religion," probably because the term "religion" is, sociologically speaking, such a slippery one, and because his project is a secular one. But insofar as "religion" encompasses the acts and beliefs (whether thematized or not) that orient us towards the transcendent, religion was deeply embedded and enmeshed into the 'traditional' society of the Crow (as it is in most 'traditional' societies). Of course, our relationship as Westernized Americans with religion is very different, and I think that the detangling of religion from the heart of our civilization is part of the "thinning out" of our culture. But it is still worth asking what "religion" we, as postmodern Americans, have to empower us – and I don't mean religious faith in a denominational god. I mean, rather: do we even have a belief in transcendent goodness? Do we have acts and practices that help us access this faith? What place do we have in our culture for prophets, seers, "dreamers"? Where do we see our potential for cultural resurrection? And: if we have rejected any such faith, have we also rejected the very thing which might enable us to hope?

Asking these questions, I think, can help us make sense of the fear and anxiety driving a lot of politics today. On the far right, there's an angry fear that American culture is on the verge of collapse, and among some there's a worry that elimination of traditional religion from the public sphere has left us even more vulnerable to this demise. On the far left, there's an increasing sense that Western civilization does not deserve to survive – that we should not only accept but propel ourselves across the abyss, come what may. Across the board, there's increasingly hostile disagreement about what it means, if it out to mean anything, to be "American." I see Lear as attempting to offer a way to and through the future that allows for a sense of continuity amid radical change – that allows us to reshape our cultural narrative in a way that treasures the past but opens us to the future.

Working out these questions must be done on both a communal and personal level. In asking how virtue can be preserved in the wake of radical civilizational upheaval, Lear recognizes that, on the one hand, virtue requires a culture and a community that can inculcate it into its members, and, on the other hand, virtue must become the personal inheritance of each member of that culture. The question becomes, then, whether the virtue of members of a culture can survive the destruction of the culture itself. In answering this question Lear himself strikes a virtuous balance: in order to endure, virtue must find the mean between relativism on

the one hand (in which virtue has no meaning) and rigidity on the other (in which virtue is so embedded in a particular cultural scheme that it could never survive that scheme's collapse). Lear rejects relativism with his insistence that virtue *is* virtue - not merely a psychological coping strategy employed by individuals in times of distress to preserve their psychic integrity. But he resists rigidity by arguing that virtue is also open-ended - and indeed, for Lear, such open-endedness becomes constitutive of virtue itself.

This open-endedness means that we each face an existential choice when it comes to the practice of virtue. There may be no "right" answer. To his credit, Lear never claims that Plenty Coups's choices were the *only* way to manifest virtue in his particular situation - he seeks merely to defend them as a "plausible" way. And, to his credit, he wants to restore to the Crow - and indeed to all people in cultural crisis - a means of reclaiming agency. Plenty Coups was not enslaved to his psyche's efforts at self-preservation, nor was he enslaved to historical contingency. The "open-ended" nature of Lear's conception of virtue meant there was room for freedom to choose and to act. Plenty Coups' ability to *hope* - to believe in goodness beyond the horizon - is what empowered and emboldened this freedom.

This framework that puts Aristotle in conversation with Freud is enlightening, and may provide one way of fruitfully understanding the role of, for instance, prophets and visionaries in helping to usher a people through catastrophic change. But I'm still puzzling over how to apply these insights to our own historical and cultural milieu. Lear suggests ways in which our cultural framework differs from the Crow's, but he never tells us how those shifts might effect how we apply the lessons he's drawn from Plenty Coups. But perhaps, given the polarization and fragmentation of Western culture today, those are answers we'll each have to work out for ourselves.

Joshua moses says

You could live on this book alone I think.

LVD says

what is our buffalo?
OIL.
CAPITALISM.
what would our culture be like without them?

Gregory Sotir says

I had conflicting responses to this book, on the nature of the violence of warrior culture in the Crow people, on their collaboration with the US soldiers against the Sioux, and with the repetitive and academic style of Jonathan Lear, yet the concept of Radical Hope as a creative way of facing and overcoming cultural devastation is an important one. But the title and concept are somewhat misleading. Many would argue that collaboration with an enemy invader is always wrong, and perhaps rightfully so. That collaboration, from a dream vision, that sense of the profane, of going against the accepted norms of native cultural response and reaction to invasion, does make this an important historical work, although not quite as philosophically subversive as the author might have wanted. The last chapter starts to explore some of these rich and dark contradictions, but then it is over with. I wish the author had started to explore them in the midst of the book

rather than repeating his original thesis ad nauseam.

Ellen says

This book addresses something I've been thinking about constantly for some time--that is how people who have been stripped of a context in which to live as human beings manage to imagine survival and then to venture forth on that imagined thread. The author does not pretend to be an expert on Crow Indian culture of but he uses the situation of cultural collapse they found themselves in the late 1900's to examine the difference between wistful or magical thinking and radical hope springing from an imaginative response to a desperate situation. I had a bit of an unfair advantage navigating the methodical logic and painstaking definition of terms because one of my daughters is a moral philosopher and talks like this! But the language is not inaccessible or full of jargon--it's just relentless in it's inquiry into the most important of all human capacities--worldmaking. I loved this book.
