

October 1, 1994 (Vol. 10, no. 3)

Dear Colleague:

Dennis Banks, an Anishinabe and founder of the American Indian Movement in the '60s, spoke at UW-Madison as its Distinguished Lecturer. "We must go back and find the roots that makes us strong as Native people and, one by one, bring back the missing traditions." He says that if reservations must have casinos, something quite alien to Indian culture, then they must also have "schools, drug clinics and water treatment plants." But these are hardly any more compatible with the Indian traditions that Banks wishes restored.

Banks sounds nostalgic. Yet nostalgia itself is not a Native American tradition. It too is Western. The Western nostalgia I have in mind is looking longingly to an earlier time--to childhood. In all the societies I know about--especially those once deemed "primitive"--childhood is good riddance. Puberty rites formally dispose of it once for all. Why this forgetfulness of the past? Because the present--adulthood, a stable world with many privileges--is much better. The West, too, did not sentimentalize childhood until around the seventeenth century, when the adult world became much less certain, when it was moving too fast into the Modern Age with its perpetual uncertainties. My general point is this. Human beings do not seek the past for solace when the present is pleasing and the future looks even better. One of the saddest things in Robert Coles's study of migrant children is that even an eleven-year-old may look back to "the good old days when he was young". A suburban eleven-year-old, by contrast, is likely to disown his babyhood utterly; he yearns to be grownup.

Isn't this point, which applies to an individual's life-path, also applicable to the growth of whole communities and cultures? Seeking comfort in ancestral shadows is natural when the present and the future are so dauntingly complex and open. The threat to Native American culture, at the deepest level, is not alcoholism or toxic waste, for everyone--red, yellow, black, and white--can feel indignant about that; rather it is astrophysics and cybernetics. Henry Ford, the archetypally self-confident American, says, "History is bunk." That fits with my thesis. But there is also a fact that doesn't fit, namely, Americans are the world's greatest ancestor-worshippers! If Dennis Banks occasionally invokes the spirit of Sitting Bull, American politicians and educators are forever invoking the spirit of Lincoln, Jefferson, and Washington. Can you imagine a modern Englishman speak of Gladstone or Henry VIII in any but a patronizing tone? So I conclude that when Banks quotes a great Chief of yesteryear as though he is relevant to today's urgent issues, he is being one-hundred-percent American.

Best wishes,

