

A Lakota and a Jew Walk into a Bar, by Alan Klein

As a six-year-old Jewish refugee to the US, I'd developed a psychological kinship with the Lakota (formerly, Sioux) that seemed both natural and meaningful. This unlikely cultural pairing would become evident to me soon enough, and thinking about it now calls to mind the lead-in to an old joke, "A priest and a rabbi walk into a bar..." The joke works off of obvious Catholic-Jewish differences, but as a child I felt that despite the obvious differences Jews and Lakota shared something very powerful. I'd naively, but importantly, come upon the transcendent quality of shared experiences that offset differences in blood and lifestyle. Anthropologists refer to the ability to seize on cultural common ground as Culture with a capital "C." With this view, the lead-in to the old joke, and even the joke itself, would be in question: "Two clergymen walk into a bar..."?

Culture with a capital "C" is increasingly giving way to its myopic counterpart, culture with a small 'c', or existence as an expression of differences. What *every* mother, or carpenter, or clergyperson everywhere has in common is being increasingly neglected in favor of how different mothers, carpenters, or clergy people are around the world. Gone is the delicate balance in which the differences that we initially see, fade into a growing recognition of things that we have in common.

My family was part of a clustering of Jewish survivor-refugees that had been sent to Buffalo, New York to start over. After a few years, there would be about 500 of us. We lived in a predominantly Black, lower working class community that was supportive of us as newcomers. It was around this time that I first remember the stories that seemed to fill my home. Less stories than piercing shards of memories shaped by deprivation and brutality, they found their way into

many conversations, no matter how innocuous. For whatever reason, I mostly associate these frightening accounts with my parents and their friends playing gin rummy. In my little boy's mind, it was as if their grim stories were the cards they'd lay down or pick up.

In Buffalo, NY, we strove to learn new ways of living and speaking. Too poor to own a television, and with English as Second Language programs still decades away, my family would go to movie theaters twice a week to learn English. It was there I was first introduced to Westerns. During the early 1950s, Americans were fed a steady diet of "Cowboy and Indian" films and television series in which the heroes were White males, and the cartoonish depictions of Natives were made still more unflattering by them presented as threats to all things good, all things Christian and civilized. While my friends identified with the John Wayne, "Indian Fighters" like Daniel Boone, and the US Cavalry, what I saw on the screen drew me to Sioux, Apache, Comanche, whatever native group that was being targeted. For me the screen was a visual echo of the narratives of genocide I was getting in my home! I watched these movies of the cinematic slaughter of natives by the Cavalry and anxiously counted how many charging Cheyenne or Lakota died each time a white man fired his weapon. It rattled my tiny psyche, but also built a powerful psychological bridge to natives.

The big screen also showed me a defiance I'd never seen, because rather than passively walk to their deaths as my family seemed to have, these natives hurled themselves at their attackers. That made them heroes to me, and I became fixated on them. Though I didn't like to read, I'd go to the library and find books on Crazy Horse, or The Battle of the Little Big Horn. In the "Cowboy and Indian" toy sets we all got as presents, I'd swap all of my cowboys for the Indian figures - a move that made me popular with the other kids in the neighborhood. I insisted we call our neighborhood baseball team the "Colvin Avenue Blackhawks" in honor of the Sac

and Fox Chief. I was drawn to Indian defiance in direct proportion to distancing myself from my family's narrative in which I found no clear acts of resistance. "Two victims walk into a bar..." Much later in life I would learn that my Grandmother Yospa had died a hero's death worthy of all of the heartfelt respect I'd given to these Lakota.

It wasn't a surprise, that twenty years later, as a young graduate student in anthropology I'd be drawn to study the Lakota (formerly and incorrectly named Sioux). My timing couldn't have been worse, however. The tribe was embroiled in a civil war following the takeover of Wounded Knee in 1972 by American Indian Movement activists, another act of defiance that I celebrated but, that ruined any chance of doing fieldwork on Pine Ridge Reservation. Decades passed. I crafted a career far from the Plains. In 2014, in the final phase of my anthropology career, I tried for the last time to study the Lakota, and this time it clicked.

I set off for Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota knowing no one, with nothing to use as a lure, no skills of use to anyone. I was merely hoping that there would be something about my research that might be considered tolerable by someone with influence. There are two ways in which a researcher can gain entry into a community: address needs, or feed egos. With my interest in how avidly native basketball was played, I relied on the latter. The project was initially quite vague, but that really doesn't matter that much, because no matter how well thought out a research project might be, no matter the depth of expert advice on how to approach a community, gaining entrance is always a serendipitous crap shoot. We call them "gate keepers," people we have to enlist as allies to gain entry to a community, but who can for any reason deny us access. Wrong day, wrong person, wearing the wrong clothing, almost anything can derail our efforts. Fortune smiled on me the day I first walked into the Oglala Sioux Tribal offices, however. I was quickly passed to Tom Poor Bear, the tribal Vice President. I kept it

simple. I was there to study basketball on Pine Ridge, and he responded almost immediately, and favorably. “Basketball is something we love, something that’s positive about us! A newswoman was here not long ago, Diane Sawyer, and all she did was show us as poor and pathetic. We know our problems better than you. We don’t need that kind of reporting.” How fortuitous! I hadn’t seen the Sawyer piece but was directly benefiting from it. I was a welcome antidote to what some Lakota saw as unwelcome “poverty porn.” When I finally viewed her report, I found it moving and well done, but also saw what Tom Poor Bear meant. Thank God for sports.

Additionally, I knew that being a *Wasichu*, a White guy, was a major impediment in doing my work, especially in South Dakota where race relations have been acrimonious from the get-go. Massacre, treaty violations, and other outrages continue into the present in the form of daily aggressions, large and small. A few years back, school children on an ordinary outing to watch a hockey game in Rapid City, were victimized when racists poured beer on them and hurled slurs at them. Garnering trust as a white man would be an uphill climb, but as an anthropologist I knew that communities vet you, eventually figuring out what kind of person you are and treating you accordingly. In short, you may enter a community as an outsider with all manner of differences, but over the long haul you will become accepted or rejected for the qualities in you that the community can judge.

Whenever I came to Pine Ridge Reservation and drove past the town of Wounded Knee, I made it a point to stop at the mass grave there. This is a grim place where, in 1890, roughly 300 Lakota (mostly women and children) were slaughtered by the US Cavalry, and it continues to be a source of sorrow and outrage for the Lakota. It has also come to resonate with people from far flung corners of the world. I’d met visitors from all over the US, as well as from Germany, Japan, even a Maori from New Zealand, all making it a point to stop and pay their respects.

Wounded Knee is a simple, unadorned place- a mass trench-grave on a hilltop with a ramshackle arched entryway indicating it might be a cemetery. It feels confidential, off limits, as if you should whisper when you visit it.

Tim Giago was the father of Native American journalism and was still working when I met him. Every year, around mid-December, Giago wrote an op-ed piece to commemorate the Wounded Knee Massacre, and I once asked him why he made it a point to write this editorial each year. He told me that his grandmother, as a little girl, had encountered some of the badly injured Wounded Knee survivors who came to her house for treatment, as well as some of the soldiers who had butchered them...blood still on them while stopping for water. It scarred his grandmother for life, and in telling a young Tim Giago about it his Grandma inadvertently passed along a part of the trauma. Of course, that resonated with me, and I told Tim that my mother had survived Auschwitz. His eyes narrowed and he remained silent, but something had happened. It wasn't so much a transcendent moment, as an instant in which he suddenly saw us occupying the same special bandwidth. In that moment of cultural convergence, though I didn't suddenly become one *of* them, I became one *with* them. We'd been disfigured in the same way. And it would occasionally happen with others at Pine Ridge with whom I shared my mother's story- that grim awareness that Wounded Knee and Auschwitz made up a hidden hallway of shared sadness. When I told my 95-year-old mother about this, she said nothing, though a faint smile crept across her face. The biggest fear in her life is that the world will forget what she went through, but here someone far removed from her ordeal, understood. I'm certain that Tim's grandmother also needed people to understand what traumatized her as a girl, but it was us, decades later that would make the connection. "Two children of a holocaust survivors walk into a bar..."

