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RCC300H: Tradition and Innovation
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The Importance of Leading a Balanced Life

In his book *The Vindication of Tradition*, Jaroslav Pelikan defined the difference between tradition and traditionalism in saying that “Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living” (65). By putting it in these terms, Pelikan sees tradition as something that is constantly in conversation with the past, while traditionalism is something that prevents people from growing with the world around them because they are stuck in their dead faith. To counteract that, people need to innovate, but ideally keep their traditions. Traditions help people to stay rooted, but innovation aids in growth. Both tradition and innovation are essential elements of living well, but one should not dominate the other—both should play an equal part in living well.

For the Crow nation, it was their traditions that gave meaning to their lives. It was through their shared traditions that they were able to gauge individual and tribal success, and it was central to everything that they did. Their success was grounded in their traditions, but their traditions were also grounded in their key virtues, such as courage. For example, a successful element of being a Crow warrior was being able to count coups or planting the coups stick. Being able to count coups or plant the stick as a Crow came with its benefits. In Jonathan Lear’s book *Radical Hope*, Lear explains that the young warriors that counted coups could “immediately pick a wife and marry; otherwise he had to wait until he was twenty-five years old” (15). The younger men of the tribe could choose a wife before the age of twenty-five if they counted coups because they had proven themselves as courageous men out on the battlefield.

However, it was not just the young men that stood to gain something from counting coups or planting the coups stick; the women that they chose also benefitted. Any woman married to a man that was able to count coups could “ride proudly ahead of her husband in a procession, carrying his shield” while wives of men that didn’t counted coups had to ride behind them (15). The woman was able to carry a sense of pride in knowing that she was with a man that exemplified courage, which is something that the Crow saw as very honorable. That sense of pride was only achieved because counting coups was a part of their traditional way of life—it’s significant to them as part of their culture and it’s a way for the Crow to gauge success by using their virtues.

The role that tradition played in their life is what made the transition from being a nomadic warrior tribe to a group banned from fighting by a foreign government so difficult. Their traditions made up their shared identity as the Crow nation. With their traditions stripped away from them, they lost that identity and had to start over by rebuilding their culture from the ground up. When the Crow had their traditions, they were able to recognize that “there is a fate worse than death” (14), and that fate was to no longer continue living as a Crow. In planting the coups stick, Lear explains that the Crow are living by the law of the excluded middle: they will either return to the tribe in celebration or they will return to the tribe as a dead man. Either way, they lived and died in a manner that stayed true to the Crow way of life. But they never imagined a life where continuing their traditions no longer made sense; they never imagined they would have to innovate their way of life on such a large scale. The balance that they were able to keep as a tribe between tradition and innovation was thrown off kilter because they were forced to the extreme end of the spectrum where the majority of what they were doing was innovating.

This is what caused Pretty Shield to tell Linderman that she was “trying to live a life that [she didn’t] understand” (56). She was thrown so far into the innovation end of the spectrum that she could no longer apply any meaning to what she was doing. Pretty Shield didn’t have the traditions to help guide her understanding of the new world she was living in. She was ashamed to admit that she hit her grandchild because “[the Crow] never struck a child, never” (60), and yet she did. It was confusing to her; she was disciplining her grandchild in a way that was disgraceful to her Crow culture, but it was okay in the culture that she so drastically had to innovate to. She had both cultures in her mind but did not know how to reconcile them because the Crow culture was no longer a reality—it was only a memory for Pretty Shield. She no longer had a balance of Crow tradition and innovation, and that is what caused her to stop living well. Instead of living well, she was living a life that she could not find any meaning in.

Wraps His Tail was having the opposite problem. Wraps His Tail threw himself so deeply into the Crow traditions and away from innovation that it caused him to stop living well, also. When he was twenty-five, he “rode up to the agency interpreter [...] and stuck a gun into his belly. He then pulled it away and fired into the air” (27). This would have been seen by the Crow as counting coups in the time before the arrival of the white men, but their old ways no longer applied to the world they were inhabiting. Wraps His Tail keeping so staunchly with Crow traditions only added to the growing animosity between the Native Americans and the whites, keeping him from living well.

It was Plenty Coups that was able to find the balance between tradition and innovation and live well in the face of incomprehensible change. During this time, Plenty Coups “drew upon ancient tribal beliefs [...] and put them to new use” (139). He understood that with the new reality of the white men, the Crow would never fully regain their old culture, but they could still

retain parts of it. Plenty Coups was able to call upon what the Crow know about the chickadee to help him face what seems to be an almost insurmountable problem: losing an entire culture.

Plenty Coups helped the Crow keep the land that they loved, such as the Pryor and Big Horn Mountains (139), but also encouraged the Crow to learn the ways of the whites. He explained to them that “With what the white man knows he can oppress us. If we learn what he knows, he can never oppress us again” (138). In keeping with both the Crow traditions and innovating to engage with their new world, Plenty Coups showed that it was possible to retain the Crow identity while adapting to new circumstances.

Plenty Coups is able to live well, according to Lear, because he has the capacity to live with “the risks that inevitably attend human existence” (121). I believe that those risks are inextricably tied with the ideas of tradition and innovation. Without falling into the trap of living the dead faith of traditionalism, he is able to keep the Crow culture and traditions alive and help them to still have meaning. He was able to face the onslaught of the white men and innovate just enough so that the Crow were not sticking solely with their traditions or completely changing everything that they knew. Plenty Coups was able to respond to those risks by maintaining a balance between keeping with tradition and innovating, which I believe provides an excellent example on how to live well.

Works Cited

Lear, Jonathan. *Radical Hope*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2006. Print.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Vindication of Tradition*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1984. Print.