**Remembering Native American Contributions**

Since September I have been participating in the ***Pizza & Social Justice*** (P&SJ) continuing conversations at St. Mark’s Episcopal Church in Glen Ellyn. These conversations, focused on racism and racial justice, grew out of a viewing of the documentary film, *The Long Shadow*, which explores the legacy of slavery and its implications for present-day American society.

One evening, Sarah, another participant at ***Pizza & Social Justice,*** made an observation about the gross amount of misinformation that seems to plague our high schools’ teaching of American History. This challenge about misinformation was also highlighted in a TED talk by history professor David Ikard called **THE DANGERS OF WHITEWASHING BLACK HISTORY**. (Professor Ikard draws on his personal experience and that of his children to point out some of the hazards that confront all Americans when we either don’t know our true history or we pass along a “rose-colored glasses” version of American history from generation to generation.)

While reflecting on the content shared in *The Long Shadow* documentary, Larry Murphy, a faculty member at Northwestern University’s Garrett Evangelical Theological Seminary, went further and noted how it often seems that America and its cornerstone institutions (i.e., government, schools, religious institutions, media, etc.) intentionally pass along a version of American history intended to project an image of an America “worth fighting for, worth sacrificing for, and worthy of our support with taxes.” I also recalled how sociologist James Loewen, the author of ***Lies My Teacher Told Me*** and ***Sundown Towns***, is merciless as he is exploding the myths that plague our teaching of American history.

All of this led me to thinking about Native Americans and the multitude of the contributions to world civilization that they have made but seldom get credit for. For example, in the food category where as much as 60% of the present world’s food supply was first cultivated or discovered by Native American agriculture their contributions are rarely acknowledged. Among the dozens of foods that have Native American “roots” are corn (maize), popcorn, wild rice, at least fourteen varieties of beans, squash, pumpkins, cranberries, potatoes, maple sugar & syrup, tomatoes, pineapples, avocados, tapioca (manioc), chocolate (cacao), peanuts, vanilla, turkey, and chewing gum. Other products with Native American origins are canoes, toboggans, tobacco, cotton, rubber, quinine, the game of lacrosse, tipis, snow shoes, kayaks and moccasins. The programs of many modern American youth organizations (e.g., Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCA, and Campfire Girls) are patterned on Native American lore, arts and culture. Our democratic form of government draws upon the Iroquois Confederacy, a league of six Native American nations that occupied the Midwest and Northeastern United States and portions of Canada.

Our American value system—or at least many of the values we aspire to as Americans—were deeply reflected in Native American values. These include ecology (respect for the earth and nature), lack of prejudice, respect for God (or the Great Spirit), generosity and sharing of material acquisitions, courage, respect for elders, lack of religious animosity, many millennia of peace and lack of major wars, lack of alcohol dependence, no extremes of rich and poor, no hard boundaries and a lack of prisons or jails.

Native Americans have served both the United States and the European settlers in many direct ways as well. They served as guides in the early exploration of the Western Hemisphere. Many of their trails became the roads and railroads over which the settlers advanced across the continent. Log cabins are an adaptation of Native American longhouses. Advantageously located sites of Native American villages and settlements became European settlements and later modern cities such as Chicago, Detroit, St. Louis, Kansas City, Pittsburgh, Pocatello and countless others. Twenty-one states have names derived from Native American words or culture. And during the Second World War, Navajo soldiers distinguished themselves as “code talkers” when their language was used as a means of communication that the Japanese and Germans were unable to decipher.

This awareness—very little of which was emphasized in the American history of my elementary and secondary school education—led me to some personal reflection questions as well: ***Who were the indigenous peoples who occupied the city or county where I presently reside?*** Or where I grew up? Do I know the answer to that question or have I ever given it any thought? ***Have I had direct personal experience or contact with Native Americans?*** How old was I when I first met or had direct contact with a person who identified as Native American? ***What are some of the media representations of Native Americans that I grew up with?*** Were they positive or negative characterizations? ***What do I know about the genocide of Native Americans?*** Is some form of that genocide still going on today? What are its legacies? ***What are the three Native American nations (a/k/a tribes, ethnic groups; there are at least 500 in North America alone) whose histories I am most familiar with from my education or personal experience?*** Navajo? Sioux? Cherokee? Other?

One commentator and observer of American culture and history that I really admire a great deal felt that Native Americans, if they were given the opportunity and resources, have the potential to enlighten the entire world. Imagine! We often praise the accomplishments and contributions of immigrants to our shores (and rightly so), but seldom think about how amazing our country and culture are thanks to Native American contributions; and even how more amazing it would be if Native Americans were appreciated, respected, and allowed and encouraged to flourish.

It behooves each of us to learn about and teach our children about their many wonderful contributions to world civilization. And it may also be a worthwhile personal exercise to reflect on questions like the ones above or others that may come to mind.

--Yvor Stoakley, December 2018