

The Globe and Mail

October 14, 2006 Saturday

Canada: BOOK REVIEW; IDEAS; Pg. D17

When your world collapses

MARK KINGWELL

Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation
By Jonathan Lear
Harvard University Press,
187 pages, \$25.95

Jonathan Lear, of the University of Chicago, is a philosopher of unusual proclivities. A respected expert on Aristotle and formal logic in the 1980s, he entered Freudian analysis as a still-young man and underwent an intellectual transformation. Since then, he has emerged as the clearest and most persuasive voice of Freudian critique writing today. His philosophical rigour undiminished, he now writes with wisdom and grace about everything from Plato's *Republic* to irony and the culture of pharmaceuticals, teasing out contradictions, probing concepts and challenging assumptions.

The Freudian orientation of Lear's work, though nuanced and critical, has constrained his popularity. This new book, a sustained meditation on the idea of cultural collapse, may change that. With an inspired combination of cultural anthropology and philosophical reasoning, drawing on such favoured sources as Plato, Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard as well as Freud, Lear has rendered a brilliant, moving discussion of what it means to lose sense of one's existence without losing hope that existence makes sense.

Lear's mediation centres on Plenty Coups, the last great chief of the Crow Nation, who watched, and in many ways directed, the transition of the Crow from a no-

madic hunting culture, roaming the Great Plains in search of buffalo and their enemies, to one confined to reservations. Just before his death in 1928, Plenty Coups told his story to a white friend, Frank B. Linderman. "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."

What can it mean, Lear wonders, for a leader to say of himself and his people that nothing happened. For surely "things" did happen, in the sense that events unfolded, days passed, meals were eaten, individuals died and were born. It must mean something less quotidian. Lear argues that Plenty Coups was acknowledging that his culture, the traditional Crow life into which he had been born, was no more. The goals that made sense of action within this culture, and the lives structured around those goals and actions, were no longer viable. In addition to being a member of that lost world, Plenty Coups was the messenger of its demise: what Lear calls, perhaps meaning to echo Wallace Shawn's apocalypso play, "the designated mourner."

But Plenty Coups did more than mourn. He guided his people through a transition from one world to the next. Nothing happened any longer in the world that was gone; and yet, life must be lived in the new world. In a close and nimble reading of Plenty Coups's influence on the Crow, Lear argues that the chief exhibited a special version of the traditional virtue of courage: not merely the military courage

prized by the Crow, but an ironic and transcendental courage in the form of radical hope.

It is a striking argument. Aristotle famously defined the virtues as aspects of character, disposed to action, that make for an excellent life. Courage is paradigmatic example, since for Aristotle and many others, bold physical risk in the face of danger is constitutive, maybe largely so, of a flourishing culture. (Aristotle only considered his own Athenian example, but the structural features of his analysis lend themselves usefully to other contexts.) A virtue has the quality of being neither fixed nor a priori; it is, instead, a function of the mean between two kinds of vice: of deficiency (cowardice in the face of the enemy) and of excess (rashness or foolishness in battle). There is no formula for ethical life, for only the specific situation can indicate what action will count as the courageous one. And so the excellent person is likewise a master of practical reason and judgment, habituated by training and practice to finding the mean. For him or her, virtue is, as it were, second nature.

This analysis is familiar enough, and Lear quickly applies it to the Crow case, but with the following twist. When the higher goals of a form of life, its telos or for-the-sake-of-which, are emptied of meaning, what then governs action? The answer, alas, is nothing. Action is cut loose from sense. I may continue to act courageously, as I once understood it - say, by capturing an enemy's horse as a sign of boldness - but the context of the action has changed. Now this is theft, not

courage. Such a case happened among the Crow a generation younger than Plenty Coups, struggling with their breakdown of meaning.

As Lear notes, this sort of collapse is distinct from both routine defeats and cataclysmic tragedies such as the Jewish Holocaust. The latter retains meaning, however harrowing, precisely because the culture in question continues; indeed, its continuance despite the most evil deprivations is one of its characteristic ways of making sense. Not so with the Crow. When the buffalo were gone, and the white men present in ever-greater numbers, their world could not continue even if they, physically, did.

At this stage, Lear cleverly argues that Plenty Coups performed a kind of Kierkegaardian reversal of ethical logic. In *Fear and Trembling*, the Danish sage had argued that Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac - a move prevented at the last minute by God - expressed a "teleological suspension of the ethical." Nothing made sense in the situation, so Abraham lifted himself to a position where he could stop making sense, and so find a solution. This sort of move is what Lear variously calls "ethics at the horizon" and "reasoning at the abyss." Plenty Coups was, he argues, able to effect the same suspension in his stance of radical hope, which "anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it." Plenty Coups declares the end of the world as a

way of preserving the world's possibilities; he pursues not the survival of the Crow, but their potential revival in a new form within the white world.

Hope is a second-order virtue: It does not directly guide action. Nor is it based on calculation or expectation. Hope is distinct from both confidence and optimism, which lack the quality of transcending the given threshold of sense. Hope does not predict, but neither is it blind. It is, perhaps, best described as a kind of openness or awaiting, a deep response to the character of human life as, in Lear's terms, finite and erotic. We are vulnerable not only to the hard edges of a given world - gravity and other people, hunger and death - but also to the possible collapse of the world as such. At the same time, we reach out to the world, and each other, longingly, searching for and sometimes finding intimacy.

Radical hope is thus a kind of imaginative excellence, and Lear makes a thorough case for the value of this virtue, even as he notes that it is often untenable in first-order, unironic ethical systems. His account extends past the Crow and opens up meaning for anyone, anywhere, who lives in and thinks about his or her world. Still, I would like to have seen more argument about the precise relation between hope and action, since many philosophers consider hope, like reflection, an activist as well as imaginative virtue. (On this point, *Radical Hope* is perhaps best read as a post-facto introduction to Lear's defence of "conceptual

therapy" in a 2003 book, *Therapeutic Action*.) There are other moments to give pause. Lear is mostly scrupulous about usage, arguing for example that "white man" and "Indian" are the preferred terms among the Crow, but I wonder if his use of "squaw" has the same approval. The case for Plenty Coups is strong, especially with the benefit of hindsight, but many readers will have more sympathy for the Sioux chief Sitting Bull, who disdained the Crow capitulation in favour of his own kind of radical gesture, not of hope but of refusal. Given that Crow courage, too, was motivated by the idea of a fate worse than death, there must have been Crow who agreed with Sitting Bull.

This debate cannot be settled, of course. Until concrete challenges of collapse arise for us, we can only refine and deepen our notions of virtue. The peculiar purview of hope as a virtue is that it is oriented to unforeseen possibilities. There is no telling what specific actions it will enjoin, or make sense of. Lear's moving book is a testament not only to the virtues of a given people, and their leader, but to the virtue of thought itself.

Contributing reviewer Mark Kingwell is a professor of philosophy at the University of Toronto and the author, most recently, of Nearest Thing to Heaven: The Empire State Building and American Dreams.

GRAPHIC: Illustration