

# Radical Hope

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Jonathan Lear's new book, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, is a short work, but subtle and profound, so my brief discussion here will hardly do it justice. I encourage you to read it, think about it, and ponder its implications. Certainly feel free to contact me if you'd like to discuss it further.

Lear's slim volume, only 154 pages, is a work of philosophical anthropology that focuses on Chief Plenty Coups of the Crow, who led his people for almost 60 years until his death in 1932. During that difficult period for Native Americans, some tribes like the Sioux, under the leadership of Sitting Bull, fought the US in a futile effort to maintain their warrior culture. But Plenty Coups, who had a vision-dream when he was nine of the destruction of the Crow way of life, led his people on a path of cooperation with US forces, an act for which Sitting Bull would later condemn him. Plenty Coups' greatness, however, was that he had hope, radical hope to use Lear's term, that in the face of cultural devastation his people could transform themselves into something they did not understand and that they could do this by listening and learning "like the Chickadee."

"In that tree is the lodge of the Chickadee," a voice said to Plenty Coups. "He is least in strength but strongest of mind among his kind. He is willing to work for wisdom. The Chickadee-person is a good listener. Nothing escapes his ears, which he has sharpened by constant use. Whenever others are talking together of their successes and failures, there you will find the Chickadee-person listening to their words."



Black-capped Chickadee  
 by Larry McQueen



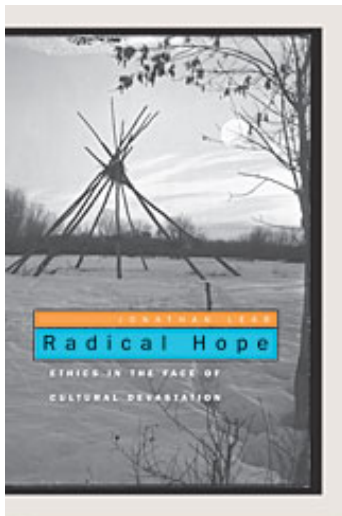
Photo of Chief Plenty Coups from [Jonathan Lear's \*Radical Hope\*](#)

While I wouldn't normally judge a book by its cover, this book's arresting dust jacket invited me to sit quietly in a secluded place to ponder the nature of leadership during significant and frightening change. It was winter when this photo was taken around 1910 (see below). The full moon sits low in the sky, seemingly floating on wisps of clouds and coming to rest on a snag of barren tree branches, a few with clinging winter leaves that haven't yet been blown away by fierce, bone-chilling Wyoming winds. In the background, on a snow-covered field bordered by leafless trees and bushes, a naked Crow tipi frame sits abandoned, starker still than the winter-dead trees that will be reborn in the spring. As the photograph suggests and as Lear explains, the Crow will eventually experience no seasonal rebirth when their culture is threatened with devastation. Theirs will be a re-creation of a different kind, a rebirth that will depend not on seasonal changes or government assistance, but on the radical hope of Chief Plenty Coups.

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**Black-capped Chickadee**  
(*Poecile atricapillus*)

**Cool fact from the [Cornell site](#):** The distinguishing vocalization "chick-a-dee-dee" of the Black-capped Chickadee is one of the most complex vocalizations in the animal kingdom. Depending on slight variations in the phrases, the call can convey separate, unique messages: in addition to acting as a contact call or as an alarm call, chickadees also use their call to relay information about an individual's identity or to indicate that they recognize a particular flock.



In the 1920s near the end of his life, Plenty Coups recounted stories to his friend Frank Bird Linderman, who published the account in 1930. Though Linderman had studied "with sympathy" Native Americans for more than forty years, he apologized for his inability to truly understand Plenty Coups even though the chief claimed that Linderman "felt his heart." In particular Linderman found it odd that no matter how hard he pressed, Plenty Coups refused to tell him stories of the Crow after they were confined to a reservation. "I can think

Cover of Lear's *Radical Hope* from the [Harvard Press site](#).

back and tell you much more of war and horse-stealing," Plenty Coups said. "But when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened."

Lear finds this statement -- "After this nothing happened" -- at odds with the critical role Chief Plenty Coups played in successfully guiding his people from their nomadic, hunting, and warrior past into an unknown future by encouraging them to learn the white-man's ways without abandoning their tribe. While we might be tempted to conclude that Plenty Coups was dejected by the loss of his culture or was being modest, downplaying the significance of his accomplishments, Lear concludes that such an interpretation imposes a western point of view on a process of cultural devastation that results, ultimately, in the complete loss of point of view. Westerners are ill-prepared to understand this because we promote innovation and creativity, and encourage re-invention when needed. So it can be challenging for us to understand other people for whom culture is immutable.

For the Crow prior to US domination, hunting and nomadic war were the foundations of their culture. It is believed they migrated in the 1700s to Wyoming and Montana where they had to be good hunters to survive, but where they also had to defend themselves against tribes such as the Sioux, Blackfeet and Cheyenne. And the prowess of Crow warriors was determined in large measure by the planting of coups sticks and counting coups.

A Crow warrior would plant a coup stick in the ground to define territory that he would defend to the death. And he would count coups by taking a live enemy's weapons, by striking the enemy first in battle, by striking the enemy's breastworks while under fire, or by stealing a horse from the enemy's camp. Great warriors like Plenty Coups would count and recount their coups, but these defining acts at the center of their culture became meaningless when the Crow were confined to the reservation and tribal warfare was outlawed by the US government. It was at this point that the Crow lost their point of view. As Plenty Coups said, "After this nothing happened."

To understand the catastrophic significance of this cultural change, imagine what would happen if a supremely powerful alien population took control of our country and declared that organized, institutional education would no longer exist. Since organized education is central to our culture, central to our sense of re-invention, and since we can't imagine a life without K-12 schools and the possibility of college and graduate degrees, we would have effectively lost our point of view. Our culture would be devastated.

In the face of such a change, some might advocate Sitting Bull's approach to continue on as before. They would "fight" to the end by pursuing institutional education regardless of the law. But remember that this alien force is so powerful and overwhelming, like the US force relative to the Native American's, that successful opposition would be impossible. Others might follow Plenty Coups' lead by searching for a new type of education, by searching for a new type of culture informed by their past. While these people would be accused of collusion with the enemy because they did not plant coups sticks and fight to the death, they would ultimately have the best chance of surviving as a people with a changed but coherent tribal identity. Their radical hope would be that by listening to the Chickadee, they would find a way to remain true to their ideas of education even though they wouldn't know what kind of education this could possibly be.

In this spirit Plenty Coups encouraged the Crow to become farmers and to learn the white man's way in order to understand the controlling culture. In this the Crow reacted differently from most tribes and societies when faced with extinction. And while this kind of radical-hope leadership is not unique to Plenty Coups -- I found myself comparing his vision-dream prescience to leaders such as Abraham Lincoln, Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela -- such leaders capable of learning and listening like the Chickadee are indeed rare, but essential during times when cultural upheavals threaten to steal points of view -- at times, in other words, like these.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.

From "The Second Coming" by W. B. Yeats

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