

INDIAN COUNTRY

NICHOL BURRESS

Searching perhaps for the anti-matter of Las Vegas, we went last weekend up the Columbia to Roosevelt, a nearly nonexistent town thirty miles past Biggs, on the Washington shore.

We went for the first annual pow wow of the Pine Creek band of the Yakamas. Our friend Jack Schwartz -- Indian Jack, the only redheaded Jewish Indian from Brooklyn we know -- flew up from Santa Monica to be with his old friend Warner Jim, chief of the Pine Creek band and ex-Salmonscam felon, and Howard Jim, chief of the Celilo, Jack's Indian father and Warner's brother.

Nothing would do but that we should join him on the river. There are worse social obligations.

Because, without supervision, we cannot be trusted to come back, we went under the care of Tasha, our plucky day nurse who had never been to a pow wow. "Savages," we warned her, "absolute savages."

The first afternoon floating in the Columbia, the river the people call Che Wana, the sun baking our foreheads, the drumming and singing playing our cerebral cortexes like a harp, the Indian children chattering around a floating log throwing handfuls of mud at each other, it was easy to sluff off centuries of rumored progress and be with the old growth humans who grew from the big water like ferns and camas roots.

Forgive us if we seem to romanticize. There is no need. To sit on the sand under a yellow three-quarter moon watching the Fancy Dancing of a culture that was 12,000 years old when Lewis and Clark discovered it, is to rise above any need to hyperbolize. There is a resonance here, a connection to place that has nothing to do with real estate.

The people are fed for free. White settlers as welcome as the salmon that once were there for the taking. Someone described Indian/white relations as the meeting of a culture based on giving and a culture based on taking. We're not at the pow wow 30 minutes before a young man gives Nurse Tasha a bead necklace. There's a purity in the gesture that's hard to explain.

Pow wows are family affairs, the people gathering to dance, feast, renew old friendships and pray. They are as inseparable from the earth they stand on as a shadow is from the sun. Their world, mostly taken from them, is the marriage of wind and water, sun and earth. One needn't know the language or customs to sense a wholeness not found in shopping malls. It is the sense of place resting at the center of all that is not hollow.

Floating in the river the people call Che Wana, the comets slamming into the evening star, the singing and drumming drowning petty illusions.

We smile, Nurse Tasha and self, agreeing without words. Nothing more is needed, a circle has quietly closed, a center once more found.

Summertime...

Margi Curtis

Sunburns if the fog will lift, leave the coats and sweaters in the closet, fish are jumpin' (where the water is still clean) and vacations can be justified. Such fine things vacations are.

In certain beautiful places, this is the time we find ourselves packed in much closer together. We share the beaches and the street, put on our tolerant, patient faces every day as we navigate the human tide, or become delayed, or end up in line waiting or being the one everyone is waiting to get at.

Never fails to delight and amaze me when I get a kind word or a smile from a stranger. So nice, to feel an energy which counteracts the I'm-in-a-hurry-take-care-of-me-as-fast-as-you-can-what's-wrong-with-this-place-it's-not-efficient-enough attitude. Even a person's silence can shout this message.

Why be in a hurry -- ever? Summer, winter, remember we are rushing headfirst into death -- whatever that is.

Five years ago this month, I lost a very fine man who, at age 35, was ushered out of this world on a Friday evening with his week's paycheck still in his pocket.

Now I have the benefit of his gentle voice to help answer the cosmic questions death involves for those of us yet hiking the trails of the physical world.

"Summertime" -- he was the one who taught me that song, and still whispers it to me in any season. The lilting words and the sense of the song are a slow moving river. "And the livin' is easy... Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high, Your Daddy's rich and your Mama's good lookin'... so baby -- don't you cry."

Hold onto, "The livin' is easy."



A few decades ago, R. D. Laing suggested that schizophrenia was a healthy mind's reaction to an insane world. Today, a simple split personality isn't enough. These are the days of multiple personality disorders, of individual lives ruled by internal committees.

Absolutes are harder to find, but, as usual in chaotic times, the absolutists are ready to give us easy answers, and they do draw an audience.

The general recipe for easy answers consists of a quarter teaspoon of truth, a cup or two of conjecture, and at least two cups of emotional appeal. No yeast, mind you. There is always more death than life in the hands of a demagogue and yeast will not respond.

In wiser hands, however, yeast and water, butter and flour, slightly warmed and handled gently become the bread that feeds families, villages, and countrysides. These are things that pass on life, like the children who are kept warm and handled gently.

Good bread does not resent unusual ingredients. Children who are raised with care do not resent the differences in others. Those who are cruelly taught to doubt themselves, however, will, in their weakness, look for difference and call it weakness. Given power, they become tyrants. Given a microphone, they produce vituperative sarcasm, and those easy answers.

We shouldn't underestimate their appeal. Maybe Rush is just a snake oil salesman, but much of the world thought the Nazis had some good points, yet their ovens were not for bread.

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The fall of man stands a lie before
Beethoven, a truth before Hitler.
Gregory Corso

they've got us
by the short
hairs, hung
high,
revolving
on the pike,
we are theirs.

live free
and they will trample
you
with the Sheriff
of Nottingham's
deer, tsk-tsking
at your character
as you die.

or become
their man: wear
their livery
and swear fealty
to their cause:
in the name of death
by god
you'll get your
medical
insurance

and when they hack
America's
tumors
from your soul
at least the hospital
bills
will be paid.

--Bill Clinton



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The way boards and commissions deal with the public, the way their decisions are made, affects the quality of the product. Bad public process leads to less than optimal results. Some boards excel at participative democracy, some don't.

From your experience serving on an advisory or governing board, commission, committee, steering committee, council, blue (or other color) ribbon panel, or task force, or dealing with the public in your work with a government or private agency, or as a member of the public who deals with any governmental agency or associated boards and committees, how can we improve interactions between governmental bodies and the public?

Reflect about a recent experience with a public board. Does the public feel alienated from the panel? ("There's an invisible wall between us and them.") • How freely and satisfactorily does communication flow back and forth between the board and the public? Is that communication friendly? • How effectively and interestedly do the parties listen to one another? • Are there explicit barriers to communication? ("Each person will have two minutes to speak.") • Is there blindness to communications problems? ("There is no communication problem, I explained it to them 10 times myself.") • Does the chairperson behave like a judgmental parent? • Is the commission's demeanor authoritarian? • Does staff speak with a righteously antagonistic tone of voice? • Does the chairperson "shush" (instead of encourage) audience comment? • Is the public kept from being heard out, or from full participation in discussion, by rigid adherence to a "required" procedure? ("You're out of order.") • Was just trying to maintain control? • Are simple courtesies absent? • Are board members defensive? ("We're just volunteers." "We do the best we can.") • To what extent do boards and commissions truly invite and make constructive use of the public's ideas? • Is participation invited so long as it is inconsequential, such as ranking the relative importance of elementary education vs. clean air and water? • Does the place and time of meetings encourage public attendance? • Does the deck appear stacked? Do outcomes appear foregone, regardless of public comment and the open discussion? • Would comments about the discussion process be allowed, or precluded, during the discussion? • Do commission members sometimes show failure to understand each other's thinking? • Do members demonstrate capacity for critical and creative thinking? • When answers seem most perfectly obvious, does that indicate blindness to alternative perspectives?

There is room for heightened awareness and understanding, and more "compassionate communication" between council/committee members and the public being served.

If you would like to get together a workshop/discussion directed toward improvement in the way public bodies deal with the public in our Coastal/Lower Columbia regional community roughly bounded by Oysterville, Wheeler, Hammond and Skamokawa), or have in mind other topics of social, environmental and economic concern you would like to see given more consideration, please contact Robert Stricklin at -

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