Institutional Memory as Community Safeguard

By Jay Taber

According to Slavenka Drakulic, author of <u>The Balkan Express</u>, war is a simple matter. No politics, no dilemmas, nothing but struggle.

Prior to this state of affairs, though—she notes--comes a process of getting used to the idea of war, making the idea a part of everyday life. "Then," she observes, "rules can change, rules of behavior, of language, of expectations…no room for dialogue anymore, but only for opposing sides to issue warnings, threats, conditions…"

The social conflict that precedes war or political violence is replete with abnormal conduct and rhetoric. References to fears and grievances—real or imagined—proliferate.

It is during these times, in particular, that other narratives function as community safeguards against organized aggression, xenophobia, vigilantes.

Barbara Gray and Pat Lauderdale, in their paper <u>The Great Circle of Justice</u>, http://www.cwis.org/fwj/61/great_circle_of_justice.htm refer to narratives and stories as

> "basic life forces needed to establish and to preserve communities and develop a common culture of shared understandings, and deeper, more vital ethics…how humans are to live with each other…a blueprint that provides the communities' structures (e.g., political and spiritual forms of governance, kinship relations, and societies that have specific duties and responsibilities in maintaining justice within the community)."

Through participation in narrative events, they claim, those who feel as if they are alone become connected to their community.

Gray and Lauderdale's paper, oriented toward American Indians, applies as well to the rest of us here in Indian country; the stories we tell help to model the type of society we want to live in, who we are, and where we came from. And it is this role of storytelling, the use of history, the preservation of memory, that enables us to recognize patterns of conduct and rhetoric our communities have witnessed previously, in order for us to comprehend new threats and dangers. Replenished, renewed, and repeated, these stories build a cohesive narrative of our collective understanding—our *institutional memory*.

Memories, however, do not reside in books or aging minds alone; indeed, they require the regular nourishment of ceremonies and conferences and public gatherings where they are spoken and heard and embellished with the perspective of time and maturation and contextual change. And by making the linkages between the past and the present, our stories-- with luck--allow us to create the narrative of a future that embraces both.

In his occasional paper, <u>Tribes Institutions Markets Networks</u>, David Ronfeldt examines the framework of societal evolution, contending that, "Civil society appears to be the realm most affected by the rise of the network form, auguring a vast rebalancing of relations among state, market, and civil-society actors around the world...a new center of meaningful citizenship." These networks—emerging in response to broad societal conditions—embody, he notes, "a distinct cluster of values, norms, and codes of behavior" that, combined with other forms, "allows a society to function well and evolve to a higher level," but "depends on its ability to integrate these contradictory forms through the regulatory interfaces of law and policy."

Absent a widespread tribal support system or reliable public or private institutions (let alone markets) for the regular exercise of our new narratives incorporating our vital stories, values, and norms, it is the network form we must now rely on as "curator" of these tales. Organizations within a civil-society network, more precisely, the individuals who retain these collective memories, are then crucial to keeping them alive. The communication of our stories will then determine who we will become.

At the time of the negotiations between the six republics of Yugoslavia over their post-communist destiny, the many ethnic and religious groupings within Yugoslav society had been living side by side with and marrying each other for half

a century. But their common language and culture had developed over a period of six hundred years of Slavic Balkan identity, united in opposition to external rule by both Muslim and Christian empires. By the late 1980s, they were a remarkably tolerant society.

Yet, grievances from the Second World War and the Communist era were still fresh enough to be rekindled by political manipulators determined to foment popular violence for political power. The trick was how to incite populations that had come to value harmonious relations with their neighbors and fellow countrymen, despite differences in religious practice or ethnic history.

Not surprisingly, leaders in Belgrade turned to the state-controlled radio and television to mount a campaign of fear and loathing based on imaginary and wildly-exaggerated grievances and stories of persecution. Leaders in Zagreb unwisely followed suit with an overly zealous nationalistic campaign, which in turn fed these fears, followed by Belgrade's use of paramilitary, vigilante militias to initiate actual violence, the response to which could then be used as justification for military intervention. A classic formula.

But the disintegration of the Balkans in the 1990s, as it is so aptly described in The Fall of Yugoslavia by BBC correspondent Misha Glenny, is most noteworthy for its documentation and interviews on the scene as the tragedy unfolded. The picture Glenny portrays is one of a country confused by the change from communism to democracy, bewildered by mounting economic insecurity, and fearful of the horrors of hostilities about to be unleashed, yet still nearly incapable of imagining civil war in their largely integrated multicultural federation. Even among the Serbs, there was a very large and active opposition movement that demanded a peaceful resolution to the questions of boundaries and independence for each republic.

What is remarkable is how easy it was to plunge these socio-economically interdependent peoples into conflict and violence and, eventually, war, by introducing first stories of persecution, then thuggery, then weaponry—strategically--into enclaves of ignorance and insecurity. After that, it was merely a matter of escalation of nationalistic hyperbole, continued fabrication of atrocity, followed by commission of the real thing. Once trust is broken, the prophecies of vengeance are self-fulfilling; the voices of reasonable people can no longer be heard.

For those of us who don't own the press or radio and television, the challenge of safeguarding our communities from subversion or attack is both formidable and invigorating. It is in this constructing of networks through face-to-face interaction, in pursuit of comprehending the forces against us, that we can discover our strengths and deepest values, and, with luck, develop enduring loci of memory and understanding to guide, comfort, and console those yet to come.

In the war of ideas surrounding the philosophy of racism, both tribal and ancient national legacies—in and of themselves not necessarily malign--often merge with loyalties identified with modern states, their institutions and borders, enabling a perversion of the authentic relational aspects of "kinship" to the point of absurdity.

It is in situations like the present—where the breakdown of states is so pronounced—that this nonsense becomes lethal.

As peoples and borders continue to relocate in the aftermath of the European colonial experiment and the Cold War, we have no choice but to come to terms with what Dr. Richard Griggs of the University of Capetown describes in The Breakdown of States http://www.cwis.org/fwdp/international/statebrk.txt as the nations that endure, "beneath the boundaries of states like bedrock as ephemeral state boundaries shift like wind-blown sand over the surface." Dealing simultaneously with our dysfunctional institutional forms, and with our misplaced loyalties and prejudices is bound to exacerbate our current global madness, but if we shoulder this burden intelligently—examining the roots and catalysts of conflict--we have half a chance to survive. Honoring the efforts of our elders while instructing our future warriors is one way to prepare.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, in his book Civil Wars: From L.A. to Bosnia, observes that the inability to distinguish between bravery and cowardice is symptomatic of autism and the loss of conviction. He quotes Hannah Arendt who wrote about the period between the two world wars:

> I suspect there has never been a shortage of hate in the world; but…[by now] it had grown to become a deciding political factor in all public affairs…This hate could not be targeted at any one person or thing. No one could be made responsible—neither the government, nor the bourgeoisie, nor the foreign powers of the time. And so it seeped into the pores of everyday life and spread out in all directions, taking on the most fantastical, unimaginable forms…Here it was everyone against everyone else, and above all against his neighbour…

What distinguishes the masses today from the mob is their selflessness, their complete disinterest in their own well-being…Selflessness not as a positive attribute, but as a lack: the feeling that you yourself are not affected by events, that you can be replaced at any time, anywhere, by someone else…This phenomenon of a radical loss of self, this cynical or bored indifference with which the masses approached their own destruction, was completely unexpected…People were beginning to lose their normal common sense and their powers of discrimination, and at the same time were suffering from a no less radical failure of the most elementary survival instinct.

Enzensberger proposes that today's protagonists have no need for rituals, and can survive without a Fuhrer. Simply put, he says, "Hatred on its own is enough." Comparing every carriage on the underground to a miniature Bosnia, he notes that not to conform is to risk death.

Speaking of ordinary people in their everyday lives today, "Aggression," he observes, "is not directed only at others, but at themselves. It is as if it were all the same to them not only whether they live or die, but whether they had ever been born, or had seen the light of day." He goes on to assert that,

However huge the genetic pool of stupidity might be, it is not big enough to explain this urge to violent self-destructiveness…The only conclusion one can draw is that this collective self-mutilation [over such things as loss of jobs or identity] is not simply a side-effect of the conflict, a risk the protagonists are prepared to run, it is what they are actually aiming to achieve.

Referring to the apparently senseless destruction we've seen take place in places like the Balkans and Somalia, what he terms *collective running amok*, Enzensberger asserts the concept of 'future' disappears: "Only the present matters. Consequences do not exist. The instinct for self-preservation, with the restraining influence it brings to bear, is knocked out of action."

The author cautiously warns that when censorship, fear, and blackmail rule, institutions retreat and normal living conditions dissolve. Resulting criminality in many regions of the world, he claims, has radically altered public standards. Writing in 1990, he somewhat prophetically (at least as far as we in the US are concerned) recognized that with the epidemic of wars, aggression and defense become indistinguishable: "More and more people are pulled into the whirlpool of fear and hate until the situation becomes quintessentially antisocial."

As a caution to fellow journalists, Enzensberger maintains, "To a certain extent, the media magnify the person who has become unreal, and give him a kind of proof of existence." As an entreaty to all humanity, he remarks, "When the moral demands made on an individual are consistently out of proportion to his scope for action, he will eventually go on strike and deny all responsibility. Here lie the seeds of brutalization, which may escalate to raging aggression."

There are, of course, many types of borders and purposes for them, as well as issues and conflicts confronting them.

I was reading recently in *Indian Country Today* about the protest of U.S. border policies at the perimeter of the Tohono O'odham Nation in Arizona, and was reminded of a dispute between Pacific Northwest tribes and US Customs on the Canadian border twenty years ago.

Back then, Lummi and Semiahmoo and other tribes—who'd gathered to fish or pow-wow or participate in special ceremonies for around five thousand years—were upset over having their sacred items (masks, drums, carvings, and attire) ransacked by border guards. Listening to their testimony before a Congressional fact-finding panel, I could see and hear the pain and indignity in the elders' voices describing this degrading experience on their way to what was to have been a joyful reunion with their Canadian cousins.

Now days, of course, militarism trumps all in the US, and the last thing a Department of Homeland Security/INS/Border Patrol agent is concerned with is maintaining humane, respectful relations with American Indians--especially with those whose territory and relatives span the US border. And so while I was not surprised to read accounts of Tohono O'odham being handcuffed and roughed up by federal agents when visiting between villages within Arizona--let alone across the Mexican border--I was nevertheless disturbed by how the constant harrassment, this psychological warfare embedded in the militarization of the border, has affected the Tohono O'odham.

In her own words, a Tohono grandmother said, "The deaths and the violence on O'odham lands are rooted in dishonor. Confusion and apathy are significant in the destruction and lack of respect for the O'odham way of life and the right to exist as O'odham...O'odham cannot step out of their homes to conduct social and ceremonial activities without armed U.S. Border Patrol agents tailgating their vehicles, interrogating their travel agendas, watching their activities by satellite

imaging and entering private homes and properties without permission."

Recently introduced U.S. immigration legislation would require O'odham to carry U.S. passports to travel within their own territory. But, as the Tohono grandmother noted, "Many O'odham are born at home and do not have birth records to prove any citizenship. O'odham are born in their territory, which is in both U.S. and Mexico." And part of their sacred ceremonies associated with their ancestral lands is to walk the ancient trails that--similar, I imagine, to the Canadian border tribes and nations--manifest the stories and songs of their unique, bedrock heritage in the continent that has only been called America for a mere five to ten percent of the time their people have been here.

In a time when markets and sweatshop goods and labor and armaments travel so freely, what does it say about Americans when we condone the demeaning practice of preventing the celebration of life and the mysteries of the universe?

In his 1981 book The Primal Mind, author Jamake Highwater quotes Edward F. Edinger who claims, "Western society no longer has a viable, functioning myth. It therefore has no basis to affirm life." Taking heart from what he calls *today's deeply felt and daringly facilitated humanism*, though, Highwater himself asserts the first shockwaves of a "cultural earthquake" are awakening Western humankind to the dizzying realization that it is not alone.

Looking at the post-colonial conflicts between nations and states, Highwater asserts that, "Never has the interpretation of cultures been so worldwide, or disintegration so universal." F.S.C. Northrop clarifies: *Unless we are protected by poetry...the mind of man becomes overstimulated while his spirit dies.*

Cautioning against the false isolation of individualism, Highwater proposes that "Freedom is not the right to express yourself, but the far more fundamental right to be yourself...The abiding principle of tribalism is the vision of both nature and a society which provides a place for absolutely everything and everyone." I suspect he would apply this concept today to all those excluded by the myriad geographic, legal, and psychic barriers to travel and migration as we attempt to isolate ourselves from both foreign peoples and ideas. But, as they say, timing is everything, and the irony of Euro-Americans attempting to close the door on mestizos and First Nations and other migrating peoples is not lost on our indigenous continental hosts.

What has been lost, however, is the tribal or primal consciousness of most Euro-Americans, the reclaiming of which might someday help to alleviate the perceived need of defending white supremacism as a pseudo bastion of identity for the millions whose roots were severed in earlier trans-Atlantic migrations. Addressing the UN in 1977, the *Six Nations* (Iroquois) spoke of native peoples being among the world's surviving proprietors of that kind of consciousness. "The great hope," as Epes Brown states, "is that a true and open dialogue may be established through which...each [society] may ultimately regain and reaffirm the sacred dimensions of their own respective traditions."

As Highwater concludes, in the past it has been the resources of the world of primal peoples which have given impetus to the rise of human cultures and the many social cycles that evolved. Now, from the brief rise of primal peoples, he predicts, comes a new culture that replaces the exhausted one. "That is the ultimate irony of our era," he notes. "Those who have been most utterly defeated have become most influential. Another irony...is that the most linear and material minds are not aware that history has relentlessly moved past them, putting their values in a new perspective which they cannot yet see."