



Chickadee: Photo courtesy of Dorothy Badry

Becoming a Chickadee-person

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As a family therapist, I increasingly find my reading interests veering toward books and articles that may be considered far afield from my chosen profession. I believe my pull toward these other writings may have something to do with my desire to read something written with new images, conceptualizations, metaphors about people. It has been easy for me to stay within my field's literature but recently it has felt too much like "breathing my own air" and I wondered what I might be missing by staying so close to my disciplinary home.

Which brings me to Jonathan Lear's book *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. When I relocated to Calgary from Louisville, Kentucky in 2007, one of my new colleagues at the University of Calgary (Tim Pynch) gave me this book and said I must read it. I did and have returned to it numerous times since. Perhaps it has resurfaced now because of the tortured time we live in engulfed in disease and racial animus. Having hope in our current circumstances seems like a rather radical idea to me.

What I remembered from my first reading was the courage and foresight of Chief Plenty-Coups of the Crow who led his people who were being forced into a new world characterized by white European traditions that were totally foreign to them. He found a way through uncharted territory to move his people through a radical reorientation of their lives into a world of traditions and practices that were alien and inherently hostile to them. The very concepts with which they had come to know their world were no longer applicable. As a people, the Crow had their connections to their land, their way of life, and their language dismantled and Plenty-Coups searched for how they could go on with any sense of integrity as a community. They had to face the possibility that life as they knew it would end: a point at which Plenty-Coups was known to have said, "after this nothing happened." They would cease to exist as a community.

So you may be asking, “What does this book have to do with collaborative-dialogic practices? There were two themes in the book that spoke to this question: first was the story of walking into lives and circumstances with no templates with which to know or understand them, and second was the importance of fearless listening. These two themes were related. The way forward for the Crow involved listening “like the chickadee” in order to learn and understand what a new world for them could be. They had no maps, no language for this new territory, and no guides.

Plenty-Coups had a vision when he was nine and one of the central components in this vision involved the metaphor of the chickadee:

There is then a tremendous storm in which the Four Winds begin a war against the forest. All the trees are knocked down but one. “Listen Plenty-Coups,” said the voice. “In that tree is the lodge of the Chickadee. 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. . . .and [the Chickadee-person] never misses a chance to learn from others. (Lear, p. 70) (italics mine)

One of the central values of collaborative work is the audacious ability to listen carefully with genuine curiosity and attunement with others. Deceptively simple, learning from others by listening with care is the footing for collaborative work. Through this wide, deep, close-in, and long-range listening, the chickadee exemplifies “the notion of collective knowledge-making” (Beatty et al., p. 336). The collaborative practitioner fosters the context for this collective knowledge-making by quieting their voice and attending to “the wisdom of others” (Lear, p. 80). Lear refers to this as a “form of human excellence” (p. 80); profound listening to others is seen as one of the highest orders of being human.

Collaborative work involves collective contributions to understanding, but not necessarily equal amounts or contributions of the same nature. The generous listening of the collaborative practitioner is a major component of what will be produced together. Collaboration is not subject to an accounting of the amounts of contribution. The coming together produces more than what each person brings; within the collaborative-dialogic space ideas and experiences that could not have been anticipated or planned are spawned. These coming-togethers provide the possibility for new and useful understandings for those in that moment. The shapes of those moments are unknown beforehand.

The chickadee sharpens their ears with minimal filters to anticipate what will be heard. Listening without knowing what is coming or what it means is challenging for humans—we tend to be quick in connecting with what we already know (or think we know).

The chickadee is a bird that learns from others. *But exactly what he needed to learn was left unclear.* (Lear, p. 75) (italics mine)

What will be heard is unknown and unscripted. Similar to Plenty-Coups, one needs to learn to navigate uncharted waters. The venture is unnerving. How does one go through something that one cannot by definition understand beforehand? The chickadee learns from others and the surroundings what there is to discern and learn. It is the unknown that provides the opportunity for

significant new learning—previous templates give way in order to prepare for something that is now unrecognizable.

As collaborative-dialogic practitioners, we appreciate the importance of listening and occupying positions of not-knowing. The story of Plenty-Coups and the Crow People was particularly gripping in that they found ways to use powerful listening in the face of cultural annihilation. The stakes were extraordinarily high—one could say it was a “life or death” moment as they contemplated how to respond to those persons who were dismantling their lives and cultural ways. They could try to resist their oppressors (even they knew that would be unsuccessful).

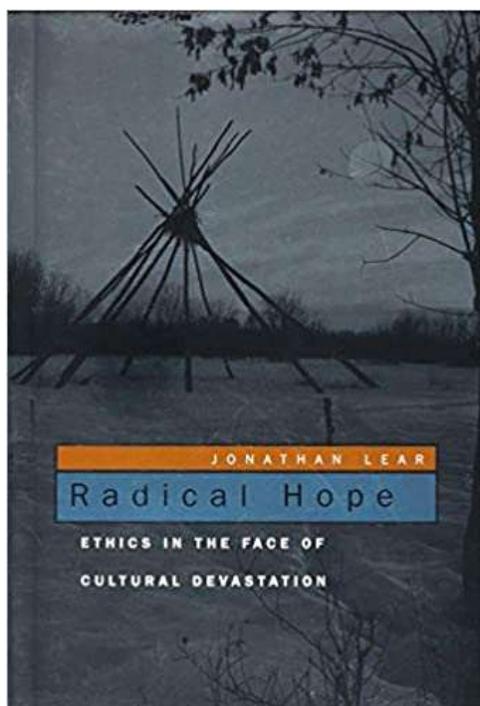
Collaborative practices fit within all respectful and loving human interactions. They are useful in all human encounters—everyday, therapeutic, schools, and even in those situations that are life-and-death. They help us talk with strangers (Gladwell, 2019), bridge cultural distinctions, and respond to hate. My view is that collaborative work is more than a therapeutic approach – *it starts with a chickadee and can become a movement, a movement that is needed in our world today.*

References

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