

## Opinion/Letters

# A challenging look at native culture clashes



**NORTHERN  
INSIGHTS**

by Larry Sanders



Imagine yourself suddenly placed in a world where all the cultural and ethical rules you had been raised to respect are turned upside down.

You were raised to believe that people are essentially good. Your new world assumes that people are born sinful and must be punished if they behave badly.

In the world where you were raised, if someone is under the influence of bad spirits, the entire community explores how a healing process can be put in place to permit the "offender" to build on his or her essential goodness and restore harmony to the individual and to the community.

This is the situation for native people, as Rupert Ross describes it in his new book, *Dancing with a Ghost*. Ross is an assistant crown attorney based in Kenora, with significant experience experimenting with new ways of relating "white man's law" to the cultural practices of remote First Nations communities in northwestern Ontario.

This background in clashing cultures, combined with insights he garnered as a fishing guide, combines into a work that dares to go where no white man has gone before—into a sympathetic "exploration of Indian reality"—the book's subtitle. Ross takes the position that neither of the conflicting cultures is right or wrong.

Rather, Ross has learned from the school of hard knocks that the two cultures are clashing in destructive ways we in the mainstream have failed to even try to understand.

### Leave us with the problems

Ross gives the example of a case that came before the court in Sandy Lake of a young man found sitting on a tree stump after midnight, highly intoxicated—a violation of Sandy Lake's by-law prohibiting alcohol.

The young man entered a plea of guilty. If the practice of the white court had been followed, a first offender like this would be let off with a small fine.

Such an approach would, as Ross points out, justify the criticism of the band councillor who told Ross our courts "just take our money out in fines and . . . leave us with the problems."

But the three elders advising the Sandy Lake court perceived the young man much differently—worrying instead how he got into that intoxicated state on the tree stump.

They found, from consultation, that the young man was depressed because his wife and young child had left him to live in another community. The unhappy marriage break-up was seen as the real problem needing a solution.

The elders promised to do what they could to persuade the wife to return to Sandy Lake and take counselling aimed at restoring the family unit to a state of harmony.

Ross points out that this decision was regarded by the white court as "relatively severe, for the rehabilitative measures amounted to a severe intrusion into the young man's life."

### Clash of cultures

From the clash of cultures in the court room, Ross dares to launch into an odyssey exploring the basic precepts of Oji-Cree spiritual, cultural, and ethical values.

This odyssey, Ross admits, may contain errors, but he says he would "rather be loudly wrong" than remain silent.

"My purpose," says Ross, "is more to raise provocative questions than to provide accurate answers."

He shows how the major axioms of traditional Oji-Cree culture all decayed or under assault from our forced imposition of Christian religions, schools in centralized communities, television, courts, welfare dependency, alcohol, "rugged individualism", and all the other paraphernalia of mainstream culture.

Ross is trying to be a cultural interpreter by attempting to reach across cultural and linguistic barriers and decode aboriginal cultural precepts for the mainstream. Such an effort is admittedly difficult, since the two cultures begin from different assumptions.

Ross says North American society "has come to see the universe through what may be called glasses of science," while Native people have traditionally viewed that same universe through supernatural, or spiritual belief."

The glasses of mainstream culture view the universe as a web of cause-and-effect relationships, all of which can be scientifically measured and changed by intervention.

First Nations' glasses, on the other hand, see the spiritual plane as ultimately in control.

## Health Minister answers criticisms

The following is the text of a letter sent to Cochrane-Superior MP Rég Béclair, concerning the Strategic Direction for Canadian Physician Resource Management, which, among other things, directs the province to reduce enrollment in medical schools by ten per cent by the fall of 1993.

Dear Mr. Béclair:

The Honorable Bob Rae, Premier of Ontario, has sent me a copy of your letter to him regarding the news releases on the National Physician Resources strategy and has asked me to report to you directly.

Initially, let me say that I fully agree with you that much still remains to be done to ensure equitable health care services for Ontario's Northern residents. Ensuring an adequate supply of doctors in the North has been a long-standing problem. The Ministry recognizes the importance and urgency of responding to current shortages.

Although the steps we are taking may not necessarily provide relief in the short term, we hope that we can develop lasting solutions.

The National Physicians Resources Strategy is based on the principles of effectiveness, quality, planning and evaluation. It will help us address the issue of physician supply in a national context. I have enclosed copies of press releases on this matter for your information.

The strategy makes a number of recommendations on the issue of physician supply management. The reduction of undergraduate and postgraduate medical training positions are only two of the recommendations to manage physician human resources.

I agree with you that in isolation, such action would not serve its intended purpose. Therefore, the Ministry is committed to the development of a health human resources strategy that recognizes the three major components of physician supply management: the total number of physicians; the relative speciality mix; and the geographic distribution **continued on page 8**

## Letters to the editor

### Marathon brochure misleading

Up until recently, I was questioning why so many tourists were stopping at our motel and asking how far Nipigon is, and more specifically, where the next gas station was. When I would tell them that Terrace Bay is only 12 miles away and that there are two (gas) stations there, their next question would be "Well, how big is this place?"

It is only now, after a recent trip to the local tourist information centre, that I have stumbled on the reason why. Upon reading Marathon's two town brochures, published by the local Chamber of Commerce, I discovered that each brochure has a map of the Lake Superior route with Terrace Bay, Schreiber and Rosspoint conveniently forgotten.

Terrace Bay's tourist information centre is not even mentioned. In contrast, Terrace Bay mentions Marathon in both its brochure and scenic sign.

In my opinion, Marathon is grossly misleading the public. Perhaps this is legally acceptable, but morally I would question it. Only one thing gives me peace of mind, and that is knowing that these people must look at themselves in the mirror everyday—and I hope it's worth it!

Charlotte Kneipp  
Terrace Bay

### An environment-conscious community

On Saturday, May 23, Schreiber held its first annual Community Clean-up. We focused our attention on all the loose garbage around town, and approximately 70 people braved the elements to pitch in.

People were also encouraged to drop-off any cans they had for recycling. The day ended with a barbecue sponsored by the Township of Schreiber.

We were heartened by the community's response and our success was due to those volunteers, businesses and participants—both large and small—who knew their contributions could make a difference.

The four gold-brick prizes were claimed by Matthew Richards, Richard Needham, Erica Gentile and Kristina Catlin/Maria Elkin.

We hope to schedule a can recycling day each month in Schreiber. It is a simple exercise: wash and squash your tin, pop and beer cans, and drop them off on can-day. That, combined with home composting, will greatly reduce the amount of garbage going to the landfill each week.

It is our hope that by involving families and friends in an organized effort, we can become a more environmentally-conscious community. Take a moment to consider the legacy of your actions on a world where your children will have children of their own.

for E.A.G.E.R.  
Lori Sim  
Debbie Brosko  
Lola Este  
Schreiber