EDITOR'S PAGE

SOME NATIVE THOUGHTS ON THE QUINCENTENNIAL

Christopher Columbus's trans-Atlantic voyage of exploration and conquest for the Spanish monarchy proved to be a watershed event in world history. The voyage's five-hundredth anniversary in 1992 has sparked an exceptional level of public discussion and controversy.

To join the nation as it explores the meaning of the voyage and its repercussions for different groups of people, the editor of Minnesota History invited David E. Larsen to offer his perspective on this event in history that began in 1492 and continues to resonate in the present day.

Larsen is an enrolled member of the Mdewankanton Dakota and a lifelong resident of Lower Sioux Reservation in southwestern Minnesota. He graduated from Southwest State University, Marshall, with a degree in sociology and graduate work in broadcast journalism. He is director of a bilingual, bicultural program in the Morton and Redwood Falls public-school system. Larsen has also served several terms as tribal chair at Lower Sioux Reservation and presently chairs

DAVID E. LARSEN
I HAVE been called the chairman of the people of the Lower Sioux Reservation, but that can't be. There are no "Sioux" people. That's a made-up word. A word that made others feel more comfortable doing negative things to us. Sioux, I am told, translates into snake or enemy. To show you how giving us names like that works to someone's advantage, let me ask: How many people have ever heard us called "the lovable Sioux people" in history books or any kind of textbooks? How about "the loving Sioux people"? "The intelligent Sioux people"? You don't hear any positive adjectives added on. Sioux is like velcro with negative words. Negative words stick to it, and people think that's okay.

Take the word primitive. This word is one I can be very, very proud of, because every year in Minnesota there is a debate that makes us all sound very funny. Every year in Minnesota, about the time of Columbus Day, some people tell you that he wasn't first. They have a stone to prove that the Vikings were here before Columbus. They call it the Kensington rune stone, and they say it proves they were first.

To us, everything on earth has a life. We call stones "grandpas." In some of our ceremonies, stones are brought in to help us reach our spiritual state of being. We say that they have lived here so long that time for them is different than for us. We have lost track of that kind of time. But somebody scratched something into my "grandpa," and now this has caused a big debate between people who believe in Leif Ericson and those who believe in Christopher Columbus.

And what is the debate about? In reality they are arguing about who was second. Can somebody tell me of another incident, another contest, another time, when some people jumped up and argued, "We were second"?

And in this argument about who was second, who is being ignored? That is what the word primitive means. Primitive means first or primary, as in primary education. I tell our kids to be proud of this, because this is who we really are. We are first! Everyone else seemed so dissatisfied with their homes and with their relatives that they made a conscious choice to move away from their families and come to this country. Except for us, almost everyone else in this country, somewhere along the line, made that choice.

Only one group never had that choice. To that group the newcomers said, "Change—or else." At the Lower Sioux Agency near our reservation, there is a twelve-minute tape that talks about the attitude of people a hundred and some years ago. A missionary named Stephen R. Riggs said that civilization should either surround the Indians with its mercy and goodness or sweep them from the face of the earth. And that is essentially what people tried to do. Because we didn't change, they had the right to destroy us. People are working very hard at that still.

What is called "education" really works to destroy us. People want us to give up a whole lot of who we are to become a part of something else. About a year ago I was talking about people knowing who they are with the state commissioner of education. He came to our area and wanted to know about the level of minority education in southwestern Minnesota. I told him that, for one thing, I didn't feel like a minor part of anything. I am a part of all there is. I'm from a group that was always here. Other people who are here may come from a minor part of Europe. They may be more numerous, but they are a minor part of the group or place they came from. But we are all there is of our people.
How can we be a minor part of anything? I don't know if he heard that or not, but that is what I said.

In that room with the commissioner were a number of school administrators, a couple of psychologists, social workers, myself, and a young Dakota man, one of the students that I worked with in school. I asked, “Who in this room knows who they are?” Except for the young student and me, everyone else had stopped being who they really are a long time ago. Everyone in this room, at one time, was called a Norwegian, a Swede, or an Irishman. They were called all those things, but at some point they said, “Let’s stop being that and let’s make up something we can all call ourselves.” And that’s an American. Can anybody tell me what that is? I asked, “Please, tell me what ‘American’ means. I have done ceremonies to tell me what it means to be a Dakota. I’ve suffered to learn what it means to be a Dakota. This young man understands my suffering, because he is suffering the same, even though he is not going through the ceremonies. You obviously don’t like what I am. You want me to give up what I know I am in order to be something you’ve made up. So, please tell me today what that is.” But none of those educators knew what to tell me to change to or who I should become.

Here is the dilemma. I know what I am. But you want me to stop being that, and you want me to become something you have made up. And you wonder why I’m not jumping at the chance to give up what I am. I never said I wanted to change. As a matter of fact, I have said, “Please don’t change me.” We’ve been saying that for several hundred years. Yet people still haven’t given up trying to make us stop being who we are. People still insist that to fit in, in our own country, we have to change to fit somebody else’s idea of what we should be.

HOW DO WE GET to this kind of thinking? One of the things I’m proudest of doing is working with a group out of New Orleans called Peoples’ Institute for Survival. We do something people don’t like to talk about. We talk about undoing racism. During a three-day workshop, it sometimes takes people at least two days to accept the fact that much of this country is racist. Much of what is done in this country is done in the name of racism, whether we say so or not. Racism is not saying, “I hate.” Very often the biggest racists say, “I love.” But it is a question of control. When we start our workshops, we define racism as racial prejudice plus the power to control.

As I tell you about our history and our culture, think about whether or not we are talking about racism. If you can accept that definition, racism can be undone. Racism can be ended when people stop thinking that they have to control other people. That’s also what I told the education commissioner. I said, “I’m here out of the feeling of love. Knowing the language is not all that you have to know to help people. As a matter of fact, you may be helping people more by saying, ‘It’s up to you to help yourself. I can help you, not because I have the answer, but I can allow you to help yourself.’ Language is not enough. If you don’t know the culture you may become a part of the problem. You make people feel even less in control of their lives by saying, ‘I can fix it for you.’”

This may happen whether you’re trying to do it or not. We teach that culture is not just singing and dancing. Culture is how you survive from day to day. If you don’t understand those things about a community you’re trying to help, you’re very likely to cause people to build walls, creating even more problems than exist now. I told the commissioner, “I love you so much that I’m going to take a risk and tell you what I really feel. It’s a risk because I’m funded by the state and my posi-
tion depends on your good feelings toward us. I love you enough to set you free. I give you permission to stop feeling you have to control me."

What really holds most of us back is feeling that we have to control someone else. If you feel that you have to control others, you are the most enslaved. The ones being held can do anything they want; it's the controllers who have to try to hang on to them. I learned that from the black sisters in the Peoples' Institute group. We should free people to understand that they do not have to control.

I told the commissioner, "I would like to give you all the power you can possibly have to stand as tall and as sturdy as you can. If you do that, I will stand beside you and I will help you to stand tall. But neither one of us can stand tall and strong when you have one foot on my throat. I give you permission to take your foot off my neck, to put both feet on the ground, and I will stand there with you. Until you are able to do that, neither of us can stand up. When you do that you are telling me that I have the power to make my own decisions, and then I have the power to make things better for myself. Nobody can make my life better for me, but people can make me aware of the power I have myself."

When I finished, the commissioner said, "Thank you. I will get back in touch with you." He was out of office before I heard from him again, so I don't know. My uncle, who was my teacher, said that once these key words are put into people's hearts and minds, they will be there forever. So I'm sure he is being affected by my words, whether he is aware of it or not.

These things we share today will affect all of us for the rest of our lives, too. Maybe somewhere down the road they will affect a decision or an action, even though we're not aware of it—a natural kind of enlightenment.

**HAVE YOU EVER** tried the game where you have nine dots in a square, three to a row, and you have to connect them with only four straight lines without lifting the pencil? You can't do it unless you get outside of the box. When I talk about spirituality and history and culture, you will also have to connect all the dots. You can't do it unless you get outside of the square. Unless you let your mind move beyond this box that education puts us in, it may sound like gibberish. We need to let go of some of these things that are keeping us from knowing each other. Staying within our own boxes, we cannot penetrate different boxes.

Education, I hate to say it, puts us in boxes. This is possible, this is not; this is okay, this is not. It puts us in these boxes and we are stuck. It becomes okay to start naming other people. I asked my brother, who is African American, how he liked to be addressed. He said he likes African American better than black, because black is a color and there is more to him than his color. Africa is his home country and America is a country that he is now a part of. It is his choice to call himself an African American, even if other people of his same group do not. I asked him when all this name-calling started. He told me that it all started about the year 1492. That's when we began to have some of these problems.

Try to imagine how it was for old Chris Columbus. Old brother Chris is out there on that boat for days and days on end, fearing that maybe he was going to fall off the end of the earth. Then all of a sudden he sees land. He is so overcome with relief and with weakness from being at sea so long that he collapses. Some of the sailors put him into a boat and row him to shore. Chris wakes up in the shade, and there is some dark-skinned man with gold chains around his neck rubbing Chris's head with a cool, damp cloth. Chris looks up, and being the guy that he was and knowing what he was there for, the first thing he notices is the gold chains. And Chris says, "Hey, I like those gold chains." And the brother says, "You can have them if you want." And Chris says, "Give me those gold chains or I will have to shoot you." And the guy says, "Here, you can have the gold chains." And you know what Chris did? Shot him. And we have been trying to defend that crazy happening for five hundred years, by making up our own history and not really knowing each other.

There is a book called *The People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn that describes in graphic
detail Chris's behavior to the Indian people. It is terrible stuff. I don't want to talk about it, because I don't want to be angry about Chris. I want to be positive about us. In the quincentennial year, a lot of Indian people want to do negative things about Chris, but I say that is too easy. Let's say some positive things. Once you have written down that he did all these terrible things, why keep belaboring the negative? And are we really sure how all of these things happened? Are we speaking truths about Chris?

There are even some positive things about the negative word Sioux. It's bad that they thought of us as snakes, but it's not so bad, in that it tells a little bit of how we lived. What is the one game animal that can be right next to you before you even know it? You almost step on this being before you know it's there. It's really camouflaged, it's really stealthy—it's great at all these things. It's a snake, of course. We were very good at using our senses. Smell, hearing, sight—we had to use them very, very well, because we had only short-range weapons for hunting and for war. We had to be right next to our enemy or game, and we had to be good. We taught Rambo what it's all about. We taught people how to survive naturally.

When Chris came over, do you think that he had a giant love boat with all of the fresh water he needed to shower every day? Maybe Chris didn't shower much at all. Do you think that Chris had all kinds of closet space, so that he could change clothes every day or maybe a couple of times a day? Chris probably didn't change clothes very much, either, coming across. Do you think Chris had somebody there to take care of his manicure, his hair, his looks? Probably not. Do you think that Chris had storage space for fresh foods and vegetables so that he could be healthy and look great? No, he didn't. Most sailors suffered from scurvy. So try to imagine how Chris must have looked and smelled. We probably could have smelled Chris way before we ever saw him. Being Sioux people, we had to be able to do that.

But all the talk about this one man back in 1492? It just shows a little more of how these boxed-in mind-sets work. In 1492, how many people was Chris? Only one person. On this fateful day, what did Chris do? He discovered America. On the day that Chris discovered America, if you laid a chart of the world on his lap and asked him to point to where he was, where would he point? To China? To India? In fact, he was lost.

According to European scholars who have studied the populations of the Americas, Chris came upon 15 to 30 million people. And where were those people? They were home. When you visit an Indian reservation, about half of the homes have a sign on the wall that says, “Don't criticize your neighbor until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.” I am trying to put you into our moccasins, just a little bit, to show you how these things feel.

I play a game with young schoolchildren. I tell them that I want to come to their homes to discover them and their families. I tell them that only when I do will their lives have meaning. Before I come, they don't mean much of anything because I don't know them. But after I know they're here, I'm going to tell them who they are. I'm going to tell them where they should live. I'm also going to tell them how they should pray to God. I can do this because I am the discoverer and they're the discoverees. They do not have the same set of privileges that I do.

I ask the kids, “If I said that, what would your folks say about me as a person? How would they describe me?” You know what they'd say. They'd say, “You're crazy.” I say, BINGO! Exactly! But we have been trying to justify that crazy thing for five hundred years. This one man was lost and then was saved by the people who came upon him, and yet he says he discovered those people. We honor the man that was lost, and we totally forget the people who saved him. Has anything at all been done by non-Indians to honor the people who saved Chris's life?

In March 1991 the Star Tribune had an article that basically admitted Columbus may have been first, but even so, he “might have been a blond, blue-eyed Norwegian.” So, we're still arguing about who was really second. We cannot get out of that box that says some other people, somewhere else, have more intelligence than the people who were here.

Another word that people put on us is native. When you start speaking that way, you erase the t. Then you begin to see us as naive people, a people without any real intelligence. The things that were brought to us are not our own. Yet people wonder why we don't do those things as well as the people to whom these things belong. We don't run things like other people do. We don't conduct government like other people do. And
we don’t pray like other people do. We are not like other people. We are the people who were here and have lived in this area for a long time. But if we don’t behave like the people around us, and who decided to change, from somewhere else and who decided to change, we are told there is something wrong with us.

My job in school is to keep up the self-esteem of the Dakota kids. When these kinds of ideas are being taught, it is very difficult. How do you feel good about yourself when you learn that before someone discovered you, you didn’t really count? Morton High School closed six years ago. Finally, before it closed, I was asked to critique some of their books. One fairly new text was an American history book from a top publisher. I looked through the colonial period, and it wasn’t bad because it omitted almost everything about us. I flipped to the twentieth-century part of the book. There was a full-page picture on shiny paper of a person with dark skin and a tomahawk. Underneath the picture it said “Obstacles To Progress.”

Our kids studied from that book. And when our kids drop out of school, people ask what’s wrong with the Indian people. What’s wrong with those parents? How come they allow their kids to do so badly in school? And what can we do to teach those parents to be better parents? My job in the schools is pretty tough. When I leave school, most of what I said remains outside the curriculum. There’s talk about “that Indian thing we did last year,” but not as any positive, related learning experience. More like an outing that happened at school. At school I sometimes talk about hunting and fishing. That’s what a lot of people see us doing. Personally, I don’t like hunting and fishing. But if I said that, you probably wouldn’t believe I was an Indian. I believe that all living things were created by God. There is a spiritual preparation for the taking of a life. If it is not being taken for a specific reason, then you shouldn’t do it.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I was invited to address an international conference on moral values, held in Switzerland. Right before I was scheduled to begin, I walked outside and thought about all of the educated people from all over the world who would hear me. I was thinking that maybe I wasn’t ready for this. I asked, “How can I be sure they will understand what I’m saying?” The answer was, “We have all these translators, Dave, so get up there and say whatever you want to say, and we will understand you.” So I walked up front and I said: “Hau mitakuyapi. Cante waste nape ciyuze.”

And then there was silence, complete silence in the room. People turned, trying to look up to the translators, wondering, “What are these guys doing? They’re not doing their job.” Then everyone thought it was a problem with the technology, so they all started tapping and twisting the dials on their little boxes, but nothing came out. I thought, “This is perfect. This is exactly what I wanted to say.”

“Hau mitakuyapi. Cante waste nape ciyuze. This is our greeting. We have been giving it for 490-some years, and you still haven’t heard us. What I said is: ‘Hello my relatives. With a good heart I offer you my hand.’ The sad thing is you still haven’t heard us, because nobody has reached out yet. And I am really honored to be one of the first people who has come to make the offer again. It is the same thing we have been saying all along: We have some answers to problems you have been looking at. But unless you take our hand as brothers and sisters, how can we feel comfortable giving good advice to people who may turn it around to hurt others?

“As a result of people not taking our hand, not seeing us as brothers and sisters, and not believing these things, some terrible things have happened to us. I think the approximate life expectancy for most people in the U.S. is more than seventy-five years. For Native Americans, as of 1980, it was approximately forty-seven years. Not because we are weak, not because we are bad, but because the world says that’s okay. People believe that things are okay with us because, after all, we have bingo and the like. Life must be easy for us. But that is what has been allowed to happen. People still don’t know us.

“Over the years there have been so many books written about us, so many facts about us, that if you start just reading and reading and reading you will never get to know us. It takes some very difficult work, like maybe asking us. It may be hard, but dying at forty-seven is not easy, either. I am forty-nine, so I’m going to say hello to all of you right now, because I may not be seeing you again. This may be our first and last meeting.

“But this is changing, because we are coming to understand that experts really don’t exist, and as a result we are beginning to speak for ourselves. What happened in 1862 was not because of food shortages but because other people began to choose our leaders. In 1858, people wanted to buy what little land we had left. Our people said, ‘No. We are not selling our lands.’ So you know what those others did? They said, ‘Okay, if you don’t want to sell, you’re no longer the chief.’ They picked out someone else and said, ‘You be the chief. We will recognize you as the chief. Will you sell us your land?’ Naturally, this guy said, ‘Sure, I’m a chief. Sure, I’ll do it. I’ll get the recognition.’
"The books say a new speaker was chosen. But if there is hereditary leadership, how does someone choose a hereditary leader? How does someone tell a person how to choose a hereditary leader? That’s what was happening. To us this was the last straw. People began asking, ‘Who is speaking for us?’ One of the reasons for our early deaths is because we feel so powerless that we are ready to become sick with alcoholism and all those other things.

“But things are changing. In August 1978 there was a major change. A law was passed called the American Indian Religious Freedom Act. In 1978 we were finally allowed to pray in our own way, legally. We were without a tie to God, without our tie to a higher power. If anybody knows about getting healthy, that’s the first thing people say: Turn your life over to a higher power. But our religion was legally outlawed. Can you imagine that? Somebody says that even the way we pray is so bad that it will be against the law. Then they want you to ‘feel good about yourself’?

“Most Europeans who wrote about us didn’t experience any part of our lives. Yet they judged us by European standards, European methods of interpreting things. There is nothing European about us, yet value judgments are made on the basis of such things as who walks in front, who walks behind, who owns what. Crazy stuff. But we are still here. We are reaching out. We are still calling our relatives, and we end our prayers in a very good way: ‘Mitakuye Oyasin,’ which means that we pray for all of our relatives. This is all of you and all living things on this earth. Knowing some of the things you have learned today, I hope it is a little harder to believe some of those hurtful stereotypes that have been spread about us.”

Pedahmahyah! Thank you.

The photo on p. 26 is by Andrea Mugnier, MHS. Dakota designs are from Chet Kozlak’s drawings in Dakota Indians Coloring Book (MHS, 1979).