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TRIBUTE TO DEAN RENNARD STRICKLAND

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Among the most ancient celebratory rites of humankind is the group acknowledgement of the outstanding deeds of a fellow tribesman. In olden times hunting and athletic prowess were consummate skills that received laudatory nods and grunts from one's burly companions. A haphazard feast punctuated by spontaneous dance and sporadic vocalizations, at least according to the B-movie genera, rounded out the salute to the "great man." Fortunately, in this now refined age, intellectual dexterity and cultural sensitivity outweigh mammal tracking as a standard to evaluate achievement. It is doubtful that Dr. Strickland's distinguished talents for analytic thinking, prodigious writing, improvisational oratory, and humane consciousness would have impressed our proto-human ancestors. Yet, one shared core quality they would have perceived, as integral to success and the definition of greatness, is persistence, that dogged determination to pursue a goal that has been the hallmark of Dr. Strickland's tenure as dean of the University of Oregon School of Law.

Over the past twenty years it has been my good fortune to include Rennard among the closest of personal friends and steadfast colleagues. Yet, my long knowledge of him is not within the domain of law, to which I am foreign, but the equally if not more volatile worlds of culture, art, and Native American politics. His substantial contributions to the advancement of the legal discipline are well documented by others and I will not attempt to address the profound importance of those achievements. Nevertheless, knowing of his extracurricular affairs, it amazes an outsider such as myself that while mounting exhibitions of art, publishing on the lurid Hollywood movie trade, and voraciously collecting Native American art and "Western" movie posters, Rennard also serves both as the chair and on the Board of Trustees of the Law School Admission Council, as a member **[*1152]** of the Board of Governors of the Society of American Law Teachers, and also as the dean of one of America's most dynamic law schools. Another mark of greatness is the willingness to personally sacrifice time and self to a higher purpose. The law profession and America's cultural awareness is the better for Rennard's obsessive challenging of the status quo and tireless pursuit of truth through excellence.

If a grand design does somehow shelter behind an obtuse universe then clarity of purpose is the roadmap to enlightenment. My own bias is that clarity arises from passion and roundedness. Rennard and I have often argued the finer points of objectivity versus subjectivity agreeing in the end that opinions make any pretense of uninfluenced open-mindedness dubious. It is the experience of living a life challenged in its assumptions, learning from its failures and sharing in its successes that grows the maturity of insight. It is the passion that Rennard holds for the law tempered by his equally strong love of art and artists, culture and its heritage bearers, Native America and Native Americans, that forms the incorruptible humane core of his outlook on life.

Another axiom of greatness is flexibility, or within the descriptive parlance of military phraseology "optimum strategic redeployment." The ability to evaluate incoming information, synthesize that data, and rapidly formulate a contingency plan, is a rare talent. Rennard's success, in no small measure, is rooted in a mastery of this skill. Upon my first meeting with Rennard back in 1981, I brashly proposed he coauthor a book with me on the history and meaning of contemporary Native American art. At the time he was the Shlepprey Research Professor of Law and History at the University of Tulsa and also the chair of the Indian Advisory Board at the Philbrook Art Center. I had just joined Philbrook and was given the unenviable task of organizing a "breakthrough" exhibition, on the "new" Indian art with

accompanying publication. The show was needed in six months. Being young, far too young, I failed to understand the value of the abstinence logic of “just say no.” Why I ever thought Rennard would consider such a preposterous proposition from a virtual stranger still mystifies me. I assume desperation considerably colored my judgment. Professionally, I knew of Rennard’s well-deserved reputation as a nimble writer possessed of a global perspective. His stature as a champion of Native American voice attracted my attention when he chaired the Native American [*1153] Rights Section of the Association of American Law Schools (1980-1982). The compassion and reformist zeal with which he approached his chair of the Minority Enrollment Task Force of the Law School Admission Council (1980-1982) furthered my conviction that here was a man who would realistically represent the Native American viewpoint on their contemporary arts and marketplaces. As if this Herculean schedule was not enough, what I didn’t know was that Rennard was also deeply engaged in the final edit of the Handbook of Federal Indian Law n1 for the Department of the Interior, the Oklahoma Image Project for which the National Endowment for the Humanities had granted \$ 500,000, as well as just recovering from the publication of his two award winning books, A Trumpet of Our Own: Yellow Bird on the American Indian n2 and Oklahoma Memories. n3 A sane man upon hearing my request would have pointed to his office door and bid me a less than fond farewell. Yet the serene face confronting me broke into a jubilant smile exclaiming, “Oh my, what fun. You know I will have to reschedule a few things, but this is all doable.” Looking back through the years from the vantage point of the scared psyche of a veteran scholar I remain amazed at what Rennard thinks is doable.

Magic Images: Contemporary Native American Art n4 was completed within three months and rush ordered to the publisher. Defying all logic it arrived in time for the opening of the exhibition. The book went on to create a standard around which a dialogue still rages as to the legitimacy of ethnic expression within the “new” Indian art. Rennard and I went on to publish two additional books together, ever enlarging our exploration of the complexities of indigenous aesthetics.

On occasion Rennard and I will unexpectedly cross paths at some major hub or obscure regional airport, giving us a few stolen moments from our otherwise obsessive careers. Most recently I challenged him as to the need to slow down and in the vernacular of youth: “Get a Life!” His cheerful response acknowledged [*1154] that this was a consideration under advisement, but first he had ten book projects that had to be addressed. There was the first draft of Learning to Heal: Indian Health and the American Medical Crisis n5 that needed cleaning up. Genocide-at-Law: Native American Policy in Historical Perspective n6 was nearing completion, but Screening Justice: Lawyers and Legal Issues on the Silver Screen n7 was a bit off schedule, and so on, and so on.

Retrospection, when unpunishingly applied, is a catharsis of maturity. Now I realized that Rennard doesn’t need another life. He has already consumed two or three, as compared to us mere mortals.

FOOTNOTES:

n1. Felix S. Cohen’s Handbook of Federal Indian Law (Rennard Strickland et al. eds., 1982 ed. 1982).

n2. A Trumpet of Our Own: Yellow Bird’s Essays on the American Indian (David Farmer & Rennard Strickland eds., 1981).

n3. Oklahoma Memories (Anne Hodges Morgan & Rennard Strickland eds., 1981).

n4. Edwin L. Wade & Rennard Strickland, Magic Images: Contemporary Native American Art (1981).

n5. Rennard Strickland et al., Learning to Heal: Indian Health and the American Medical Crisis (forthcoming).

n6. Rennard Strickland, Genocide-at-Law: Native American Policy in Historical Perspective (forthcoming).

n7. Screening Justice: Lawyers and Legal Issues on the Silver Screen (Rennard Strickland et al. eds., forthcoming).