

Oregon Law Review
Fall 2001 – Volume 80, Number 3
Cite as: 80 Or. L. Rev. 1155 (2001)

RENNARD STRICKLAND’S DEANSHIP: THE TRIUMPH OF AXIOLOGY

Mary Christina Wood*

Copyright © 2001 University of Oregon; Mary Christina Wood

* Professor, University of Oregon School of Law.

[*1155]

When Dean Rennard Strickland assumed leadership of the University of Oregon School of Law in August 1997, a legacy took root. I marveled at the initial signs upon my first visit to the dean’s office. The walls in the reception area, which, only a week earlier, presented a dusty photo lineup of previous deans, now showcased large-sized, brilliantly colored movie posters featuring law-related films. The sterile, executive-style dean’s office I remembered was now a warm, inviting room displaying beautifully crafted Indian baskets, an initiation hut door, a ceremonial, full-length headdress, pre-Columbian pottery, sculpture pieces, native paintings, exquisitely cloth-bound books, and film posters portraying Indian images in the cinema.

The new dean himself, seated comfortably in a stuffed chair, sported one of his splashy, outrageously patterned ties that we in the law school came to recognize as a trademark of his informal attire - indeed, a tie which, by the mere fact that someone dared to wear it, invited irresistible shared laughs over the obvious follies of that corporate tradition. I knew then that Rennard was going to spend the subsequent years of his deanship strengthening our institution not through the sheer authority of his deanship title, but through the power and example of his personal style, his vision, and his leadership values.

I also suspected that, in the process, he would draw upon a rich native tradition. Rennard has Osage and Cherokee ancestry. A member of the Cherokee Nation, he grew up in Muskogee, Oklahoma, a town in “Cherokee Country,” surrounded by a culture steeped in history, heritage, ceremony, and spiritualism. He spent the formative years of young adulthood attending college at Northeastern State College (at the site of the original Cherokee schools) located in Tahlequah, which is the seat of Cherokee [*1156] tribal government. A colleague of Rennard had said this to me before I first met Rennard in person: “Some may not know he’s Cherokee/Osage at first, but, as time unfolds, you will come to realize how deeply traditional he is.”

As a faculty member who teaches Federal Indian law, I knew there was no greater giant in the field than Rennard Strickland. He is nationally recognized as a pioneer whose scholarly and teaching contributions literally defined the field. He was the first academic to introduce a Federal Indian law course into mainstream law school curriculum. He served as editor-in-chief of the landmark revision to Felix Cohen’s Handbook of Federal Indian Law, n1 the singular treatise in the field that judges, lawyers, and professors rely on. He was founding director of the University of Oklahoma American Indian Law and Policy Center. He has written over eighty books and articles on Indian law, policy, and culture.

A significant part of Rennard’s career is self-described as “a lifetime studying the traditional law-ways of the Native American.” n2 Rennard highlights the vitality of traditional native law, cultivating respect for it in the institutional sense. *Fire and the Spirits: Cherokee Law from Clan to Court* gives a meticulously documented study of how the Cherokee legal experience evolved from clan to court system, ultimately “fusing tribal law ways and Anglo-American legal institutions.” n3 In a powerful afterword to one of his greatest books, *Tonto’s Revenge*, Rennard captures the potential for timeless native ways and values to influence Anglo institutions for the betterment of all society: “Civilization faces a crisis of the spirit, a great conflict in basic human values... . Our great hope of survival is an Indian future for the post-Columbian world: a world in which this time, axiology - the superior worldview - might even hope to compete with, if not triumph over, technology.” n4 In 1997, as the law school was in the process of

searching for a dean to lead us into the new millennium, with all of the societal and institutional introspection such a landmark [*1157] turning point demanded, I could think of no more exciting visionary than Rennard Strickland.

It was obvious, though, that Rennard had his choice of schools he could join as dean. Beyond his stature in the field of Indian law, Rennard had reached the pinnacles of accomplishment in national legal academia. Before coming to Oregon, he had served as dean of three law schools (University of Tulsa, Southern Illinois University, and Oklahoma City University), and had been a faculty member or distinguished visitor at several others. Because Rennard's acceptance of the deanship would bring national recognition and stature to the University of Oregon School of Law, the Dean Search Committee focused concerted energy on attracting him here. Privately, though, I speculated that Rennard's decision would be connected not so much to recruiting efforts, but to his own worldview, and tied to the circularity of events as they unfold over time and place.

In quiet ways, Rennard carries his heritage with him in every aspect of life. People who work closely with him marvel at how his native philosophy, cosmology, and mindset operate in a higher education environment. On a twelve-page curriculum vitae summarizing the most important service roles, publications, and teaching positions of his career, Rennard's parents' names and their heritage are listed at the top of the first page - a prominent mention that may take nonnative people by surprise, but is more directly linked to identity in the native worldview than all of the accomplishments of a career.

Rennard has celebrated native values in this academic setting throughout his deanship. In his formal speeches, meetings, personal conversations, and routine e-mails, Rennard typically draws upon native wisdom to place events into context. On two occasions when Rennard's deanship coincided with national tragedies, entire law school communities looked to Rennard for grounding and explanation of the unfathomable. On both occasions, when words would seem insufficient, Rennard drew upon the timeless wisdom of his heritage. On his installation as dean at Oklahoma City University in 1995, at a ceremony that had been postponed five months because of the Oklahoma City bombing, Rennard reminded an audience still torn with grief of the importance "of generational circles, circles of community and circles of family and of friends... . There is no more poignant reminder of the interrelatedness of us all - of both the uncertainty [*1158] and the circularity of life - than to think back to April 19th when this ceremony was originally scheduled." n5 And in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, during a period when American anguish turned to anger and erupted in national incidents of violence against innocent members of minority groups, Rennard forwarded an e-mail (still saved by many students and faculty) that originated in Indian Country:

A Native American grandfather was talking to his grandson about how he felt. He said, "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry, violent one. The other wolf is the loving, compassionate one." The grandson asked him, "Which wolf will win the fight in your heart?" The grandfather answered, "The one I feed." n6

Rennard's leadership of the law faculty has rested solidly on consensus-based, collective decisionmaking, instead of the command-from-the-top authority so typical of Anglo institutions. I suspect this approach is steeped in Cherokee tradition. In *Fire and the Spirits* he describes a postulate commonly accepted by the traditional Cherokee: "Popular consensus is essential to effective tribal action... . Social harmony is an element of great value." n7 On virtually every major decision of his term, Rennard has stimulated discussion from the faculty, tabled unresolved or highly contentious issues for another day, and then returned to such issues after more "hallway discussions" among faculty. This consensus-style leadership has nourished faculty collegiality, one of the most cherished - and most fragile - attributes of an academic institution.

Rennard has graced the law school with the true tradition of "gifting." In traditional indigenous society, gifting is central to all social relations. It gives rise to no indebtedness, and carries no expectation of return; it is a privilege naturally valued for its own sake. At academic institutions, typical gifting consists of presenting an important visitor with a coffee cup bearing the institutional logo; such gestures fall within the purview of the development office, and few deans are troubled by the details.

Rennard's gifting reflects the difference. He has personally offered [*1159] gifts reflecting such depth of thought, such care in preparation, and such meticulous attention to detail, that they are lasting celebrations of both the sincerity of the heart beneath the gesture and the timeless value of the true gifting tradition. In the first faculty meeting over which he presided as dean, Rennard announced a gifting endeavor that he personally conceived and brought to completion over the next several months. As part of the commemoration of our new building, he presented to the invited dignitaries and donors a limited-edition book, *Far Off Shores: The Oregon Law School Tradition*, n8 that he wrote as a lasting keepsake for the occasion. He worked with the newly established Knight Library Press to design and publish the

book. The ten or so presented copies were leather-bound, beautifully crafted in the traditional style, and exquisitely reminiscent of the laborious toil of a bygone era. A limited set of about 150 paper and paste-board editions provide ongoing gifts for law school friends and benefactors. The book is a work of art that serves as a lasting memorial to that historic moment in the law school's history. And towards the end of his deanship, Rennard announced a gift of his personal collection of Indian law and history materials to the U of O law library. The law library has already received and inventoried more than 200 volumes (many of which are special "presentation" copies), representing only the first portion of a donation that will not only benefit the law school, but also the native people of Oregon.

During his tenure as dean, Rennard gave new definition and priority to the concept of community. He focussed enormous personal effort towards nurturing student community. During every year of Rennard's deanship, students in the entering class were invited to a series of small-group receptions held at his home. From the average dean's perspective, there must be more expedient ways to greet new students, but in Rennard's native tradition, a welcome in the home is unparalleled. The gesture carried a message that the warmth of community here - even if the community is defined by an institutional mission - is sincere. Rennard also placed great value on graduation ceremonies, because graduation represents the institutional send-off of a generation of our community into the world. On special occasions [*1160] such as this, Rennard wore a "ribbon shirt," ceremonial attire that is the modern day successor to the traditional beaded shirt.

Rennard's cultural understanding and personal warmth created a law school environment supportive of a native student community, and his gestures inspired a broader learning and appreciation of native values among nonnative students. Early in his deanship a small group of students founded the Native American Law Students Association (NALSA) to provide a forum for building and retaining community. The group is now one of the most active student groups in the law school. In addition to its many law related activities, NALSA also hosts "beading nights," where students get together to make beautiful hand-beaded gifts for speakers and supporters. These are great social events often accompanied by a potluck. And not infrequently, Rennard drops in on NALSA meetings and other events to lend support. NALSA members will say that one of the greatest highlights of Rennard's deanship was a visit to the law school by Chief Chad Smith, principal chief of the Cherokee Nation. As leader of the second largest tribe in the country, he was welcomed by the school, appropriately, as a head of state. Under Rennard's guidance, the law school facilitated a closed gathering of Cherokees from Oregon and surrounding states to convene with their leader. And in keeping with native tradition, NALSA students presented Chief Smith with tobacco and a dentalia shell necklace they had made using the designs of the Kalapuya.

By bringing his native values to bear upon his deanship, Rennard indeed created within our law school (in words borrowed from Tonto's Revenge) "[a] new world in which we are not all strangers, passing without care or recognition." n9 And his role came at a time when the University of Oregon as a whole sought to redefine its institutional relationship with the native peoples of Oregon. Dean Strickland sits on the President's Native American Advisory Council, comprised of university faculty members and tribal leaders from around the state. Through the efforts of this committee, the institution as a whole is coming to value native tradition for its own greatness.

At a recent meeting of this committee, Rennard described the event that crystallized his awareness of the University of Oregon's historic potential. On June 9, 2001, a traditional potlatch was held in the courtyard of the law school at the site of the native [*1161] longhouse. The ceremony was hosted by the Coquille Indian Nation, but the president's office, the law school, Knight Library, and the Department of Anthropology all dedicated tremendous time and resources to support the event. It was the largest potlatch in the memory of any tribal person there. Leaders from forty-four tribes across five states, representing all known aboriginal connections to Oregon, were invited, and 450 native people attended. The ceremony was conducted entirely in the native potlatch tradition, which included gift giving, oratory, traditional foods, greeting lines, regalia, dancing, and a ceremonial pit for cooking salmon.

The fact that tribal people, rather than university officials, planned and carried out the ceremony according to native protocol made the institutional role a truly unprecedented one. Many native attendees were profoundly moved that an academic institution, particularly the law and anthropology departments, would support a traditional celebration in such a warm spirit of native self-empowerment. In his institutional role as dean of the law school, Rennard Strickland welcomed this great community of people coming together to celebrate native culture. To Rennard, in symbolic measure, this must have been an occasion demonstrating that Anglo institutions can, indeed, value the native way for its timeless contribution to society as a whole - a point which finds life in all of Rennard's writing and professional service.

When Rennard accepted the deanship at our law school, I suspected his decision was connected to his native worldview. I think our wonderful good fortune to have him remain on the faculty after his deanship ends must have its

source in the same springs. The richness of native life in Oregon, and the university's growing appreciation of native values, creates the opportunity for strengthening a legacy that is boundless.

FOOTNOTES:

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

n2. Rennard Strickland, *Tonto's Revenge* 118 (1997) [hereinafter *Tonto's Revenge*].

n3. Rennard Strickland, *Fire and the Spirits: Cherokee Law from Clan to Court* xi (1975) [hereinafter *Fire and the Spirits*].

n4. *Tonto's Revenge*, supra note 2, at 130.

n5. Rennard Strickland, *The Power of Our Dreams: Creating a Law School for the Twenty-First Century*, Address at the Installation of Dean Rennard Strickland at the Oklahoma City University School of Law 1 (Sept. 6, 1995).

n6. Posting of Rennard Strickland, rstrickl@law.uoregon.edu, to faculty@law.uoregon.edu (Oct. 9, 2001) (copy on file with author).

n7. *Fire and the Spirits*, supra note 3, at 22.

n8. Rennard Strickland, *Far Off Shores: The Oregon Law School Tradition* (1999).

n9. *Tonto's Revenge*, supra note 2, at 130.