

A BETTER WAY

In her novel depicting life among the Dakota (Sioux) Indians, ethnologist Ella Cara Deloria relates this incident, identified as “the kinship appeal.” One of the young males in the tribe had been murdered, and the enraged relatives of the slain man gathered to debate how to settle the score. Their eldest relative, a man of great influence, sat listening as they talked themselves out. Then he repeated to them what he had heard of the insult to their pride and honor, their anger at their kinsman’s death, their resolve to kill the murderer at once to give him his due.

He smoked quietly after this, calm and steady. In due time he resumed speaking, But now he had changed his tack. “And yet....There is a better way. That the fire of hate may not burn on in his heart or in ours, we shall take that better way. Go now to your homes. Look over your possessions and bring here the thing you most prize---a horse, say, or weapons, or wearing apparel, or a blanket. Easy ways and empty words may do for others... Let us take the harder way, the better way....

“The gifts you bring shall go to the murderer, for a token of our sincerity and our purpose. Though he has hurt us, we shall make him....[a relative], in place of the one who is not here. Was the dead your brother? Then this man shall be your brother. Or your uncle? Or your cousin? As for me, the dead was my nephew. Therefore, his slayer shall be my nephew. And from now on he shall be one of us. We shall regard him as though he were our dead kinsman returned to us.”

The narrator goes on to tell how this “harder” way required that each on first undergo an inner battle to master pride and anger. The tribe accepted the challenge, he says,

“because they saw that it was right. They saw it was easy enough to fight violence with violence. Killing was the work of a moment. But to take the murderer as a relative, after what he had done, and to live in sincerity and creative goodwill with him, day in and day out to the end of life----that was something else.”

On the appointed day, the slayer was brought to the council tipi, and offered the pipe of peace, with these words:

“Smoke, with these your new kinsman seated here, for they have chosen to take you to themselves in place of one who is not here.... It is their desire that henceforth you shall go in and out among them without fear. By these presents which they have brought here for you, they would have you know that whatever love and compassion they had for him is now yours, forever.”

The slayer, deeply moved, began to weep. “You see,” explains the narrator, “he had been neatly trapped by loving kinship. And you may be sure that he proved himself an even better kinsman than many who had right of birth, because the price of his redemption had come so high.”