“Controversy: The Chief”
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Who in Memorial Stadium has not felt the electrifying sensation of thousands of voices raised in concert when the fanfare-styled trumpet notes signal the start of a performance which is at the heart of the Chief Illiniwek tradition? The feeling is compelling, even addictive. The tradition is multi-layered and rich in meanings which reach out far beyond the walls of Memorial Stadium and the Assembly Hall. I would like to reflect with you on Chief Illiniwek as symbol and as meaning.

Humans are, by nature, a symboling species. We delight in making one thing stand for another, then in transforming, playing with, attaching meaning to and investing emotion in these things. We use everything as symbols: physical objects, ideas, other people, other species, even other symbols. Symbols are a kind of language through which we express emotions for which words seem inadequate. Some scholars think that symbol and ritual serve us best at a pre-conscious level, wherein awareness and articulation remain murky.

Over time, things are hung onto a symbol like hats are tossed onto a hat rack. Onto college symbols, people hang memories of carefree youth, self-discovery and intellectual revelation, of crisp fall days and the bonding of mass spectacle. Seeing the image, hearing the band music, we reach back through the years and touch our past. Onto the Chief Illiniwek symbol we hang an additional constellation of meanings associated with The American Indian, a legendary figure who lived in complete harmony with the natural elements, surviving tribulation with stoic fortitude. If men and women cry when Chief Illiniwek dances, surely they weep for their halcyon days, but do they not also yearn for that mystical union with primeval forces, for a state of being which represented the apotheosis of human physical development?

The American Indian-symbol summons other emotions as well: of fear, suffering, guilt, retribution, violence, dominance – unresolved elements of our past interaction with the country’s native peoples. We find these darker dimensions of feeling manifested as the parodies of Indianness which are found on Homecoming floats, in Tail-great skits, in bar contests, at office parties, on commercial products. In these realms, Chief Illiniwek as The Indian, is transmogrified into innumerable guises: train engineer, grave digger, bombardier, surfer, genie, drunk, hit man, charioteer, octopus, goal post, wrestler, cook, corpse, automobile, naked savage. These characterizations are displayed and paraded throughout the community, becoming symbolic representations which speak for us. They convey, with provocative ambiguity, what we do not put into words about the earliest chapter in our nation’s history. Chief Illiniwek as a symbol, then, will be used, abused, contorted and played with because a symbol exists in the
public domain and people will hang on it what they will. This is the nature of symboling. This too, becomes part of the tradition.

It was before the turn of the last century that colleges began to select symbols to represent their athletic teams. Called mascots, they have, over the years, become the “cherished emblem or symbol” (Webster’s Third New International) of entire institutions and their student bodies. “Mascot,” with its etymological roots in sorcery, also denotes an entity with special powers. To experience the potency of such power, stand close to Louisiana State University’s live Bengal tiger while it paces in its complex across from the football stadium. Caging, containing and symbolically clothing ferocious animals and fierce warriors from the past, we try to harness and use their power as a means to control events and direct the unknown in our favor. Such was and is our faith in symbols. If, by definition, Chief Illiniwek is the type of symbol called a mascot, why do some people shrink from the use of this appellation? By denying the reality, we acknowledge that we are troubled by the symbol. Perhaps, nearing the century’s end, we have become self-conscious about this level of magical thinking. Perhaps we are discovering that there are moth-eaten assumptions and moldering biases hanging amidst the bottom layers of our heavily laden symbol.

Chief Illiniwek is not meant to symbolize living native peoples. Have we begun, though, to see, as Native Americans do, the reflections of their lives in many of the symbolic images that comprise this tradition? Are we not, as Native Americans feel, using and playing with their lifeways in the normal course of symboling? Native voices tell us that by drawing on the power of their past lives we rob them of their present identities. Native voices ask that we remove the symbolic clothing of buckskin, war paint and feathers with which we cover their ordinary lives. Their voices ask that we remove from their images the masks of stoicism and noble savagery so that they, as living people, may be truly visible to us.

As many voices reveal to us the messages that reverberate within the symbolic language that is Chief Illiniwek, our symbol, in effect, has come to life. It is talking to us. No longer can we speak through it with innocence; awareness and knowledge intervene. If we try to suppress this incipient consciousness, we condemn our thinking to the miasma of community divisiveness and defensiveness. Can we, willingly, let go of a symbol that no longer serves us purely and profoundly? Can we recommit to the earth not only the bones and spirits of our ancestors, but the specters of our myths and illusions as well? Shall we search for more inclusive representations of our recent and ancient past to carry into the twenty-first century? To do so would enable us to find other sources of power within the prairie.