From Win-Lose Thinking to Being Good Relatives

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July 2017

In 2007, I started writing a book entitled Harm-Dependent No More: Who Are We—Winners and Losers or Relatives? That was before the 2008 global financial collapse, before Obama, and before Trump. I wonder what will the world be like when I finally finish the book. Will we experience catastrophic Earth events, mass depopulation, and species extinctions, or will we move into a Star Trek era of unlimited clean energy, Earth restoration, and a peaceful confederation of peoples and nations, including interstellar civilizations? Two powers, both of which we as humans have, may well decide.

Two Powers: Our Philosophy and Our Choices

Born a slave, crippled by his master, and banished from Rome at 43 for being a philosopher, the beloved Stoic Epictetus taught that, across change, two powers remain ours as human beings: our philosophy and our choices. We develop our philosophy or approach to life as we reflect on our experiences. What goes on within our minds then comes out in our choices. Checking in with our approach and our choices connects us with what is in our power to change: we learn from the outcomes of our choices, which spurs us to expand how we think. Our capacities to self-evolve are in play, and our self-evolution shapes our future.

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Win-Lose Thinking: Harm-Dependent

One approach in particular has shaped the world as we know it: win-lose thinking. Not all civilizations think this way, but those organized around elites, control, and conquest do. The argument is that a win-lose model speaks to survival: winners survive; losers die. The logic seems irrefutable. When win-lose thinking controls our decision-making, we prioritize winning and push aside many real-world concerns. For example, win-driven thinking does not place a priority on air, water, or laws of eco-biology, such as the role of wetlands or what toxins do to organisms—bees, bats, and frogs. It is not concerned about human rights either. Dispossession, slavery, human trafficking, murder, and genocide are not concerns. Worrying about harming others gets in the way of doing what it takes to win.

The result? We come to depend on doing harm—forcing disadvantages and losses on others—so that wins are easy and secure. Repeated in daily decisions trillions of times over, win-lose thinking fills our world with harms. The approach has made a tiny fraction of us absurdly wealthy and powerful, but the philosophy endangers our collective survival. Natural, living systems can absorb only so many harms before they can no longer self-repair. Our personal lives suggest that win-lose thinking takes its toll as well. The constant one-up, one-down, “I won, you lost” approach seeds bad feelings and conflicts; it erodes relationships and causes stress. Even the most win-driven people must set aside the approach to have enduring relationships. When win-lose thinking takes over families, for example, hurt and pain escalate and ricochet across generations.

Arguably, humans are not built to have win-lose thinking dominate our thoughts and choices. Fight-to-win—one of our reptilian brain-stem’s responses—is part of us, but it is not the whole of who we are. Other parts of our brain make us human. Humans are a pro-social species: we are neurologically hard-wired to connect. Relationships matter to us, and so we voluntarily act in ways that benefit others. Serving others suits our brains better and better serves our ability to function in groups and collectives. It is how family members behave with each other. Pro-social means pro-survival for our species.

Our survival depends, then, not on winning but on maintaining positive bonds—a peaceful, creative coexistence. We intuitively know this. When we come together in a good way, we are happy, and we can do amazing things. Many businesses are recognizing the power of positive relations and are creating less competitive and more collaborative work environments. Better relationships mean less dysfunction, hence more productive workplaces. It also means more respect, transparency and balance, hence less abuse and injustice. Being fair and treating each other well is a leading survival skill for our species, far more critical than the reptilian brain’s response of fighting to win.

Win-lose dynamics push hard against our prosocial nature, though. Nations get locked in win-lose dramas on colossal scales, traumatizing peoples for generations. My Indigenous European ancestors—the Celts—were brutally crushed by the Roman Empire.
Rome's colonizing methods burned win-lose thinking into our collective psyche, and my people, those who came to North America, that is, have used Rome's methods of conquest, colonization, and empire. Rome taught us in blood and cruelty what it takes to be winners.

**Evolving into Living as Good Relatives**

The journey of my writing is to explore the win-lose model with the agenda to evolve a different approach. If we are members of one intelligent infinity—diverse peoples living in a profoundly interrelated universe—then learning the ways of peaceful coexistence seems truer to our reality. Moreover, if we graduate to becoming an interstellar species, the diversity of beings with whom we coexist will be vastly greater. Rather than helping us learn the ways of coexistence, though, win-lose thinking has trapped us in an adversarial, violence-prone, us/them mindset.

Fortunately, a shift seems underway. Climate change is teaching us how much we are in this together and why any other’s loss is our loss too. Evolving our approach from win-lose to coexisting is a paradigm shift, yet a shift as deep as this can be disorienting. Most of us have been raised in a win-lose world. Our thoughts and memories have been filled with its dramas, and our emotions carry the scars. Exploring this subject is not about laying out an answer but about thinking critically: What if this emperor—the win-lose philosophy—has no clothes? Since human nature includes a spectrum of behaviors, what if this approach and not human nature per se is holding us back? By trapping us in a harm-based way of life, the mindset puts a lid on our moral and spiritual evolution, yet this endangers our species. We survive by evolving inwardly. Epictetus advised that we shake off thought chains—mental habits that have no necessity and persist only because we have not questioned them.

A first step in our inner evolution is to push past the winners’ hype of glamorized power and wealth. What kind of world is win-lose thinking actually giving us? The approach depends on committing not just harms but mass harms: the bigger the harm, the bigger the win. It feeds on "losers," and so it searches for thriving, resource-rich communities, exploits them, reduces them to dependency, and leaves them ravaged. We tend not to think about the lose side, but it is the overwhelming outcome. The 0.01 percent of elites is predictable from a win-lose algorithm: whatever size the pool of competitors, only one takes top prize. What happens to the rest? How glamorous are the worlds winners leave in their wake? Those forced to lose fund the winners’ opulence.

Though much of my writing "paints the devil on the wall," I describe but a fraction of the harms that win-lose thinking has committed by forcing losses on humans and the natural world. As a philosophy for running society, the win-lose approach is harm-dependent—insatiably so. It claims committing harms and forcing disadvantages are not a problem; they are what winning requires. Harms are not a reason to change a
strategy for winning, which, for example, racism and oppression clearly are. So harms proliferate. Within its logic, win-lose thinking has no "Off" switch.

There is an "Off" switch, though, and we are it. We have the capacity to think and choose more ways than this. For humans, self-awareness and the power of choice are our leading powers, hence also our survival gifts. By using them, we can adapt and evolve. Painting the devil on the wall names the worlds the win-lose story generates precisely so that we can choose differently. The switch we need to flip is in us—how we think.

Exercising choice about our approach is good news for our evolution. Instead of making win-lose our default, we can be mindful of our relationships in every direction and explore what it means to think and live from this awareness. Being in relationships involves, for example, responsibilities and accountability, as well as relationship-oriented values. Being in relationships inspires us to cultivate social-emotional competencies and to engage relationship-building processes, like the talking Circle process, that work democratically. Indigenous cultures tend to be very relationship-oriented. They often refer to “being a good relative” as a wise and practical approach. Their advice resonates with our core existence—how we exist in this world at all. Before we take on roles of winners or losers, we are and forever remain relatives—with each other and all that is. The question is, what kind of relatives are we?

Many ancient and Indigenous cultures have developed profound, positive relationships with other species. In this photo, in the grotto of the flute reeds, a family shows reverence for an ancient turtle, a symbol of longevity in many parts of Asia. Photo by Paul Munhoven, 8 January 2004. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

Introducing Myself: On a Journey from Colonization to Coexistence

Win-lose dramas play out starkly between groups—peoples and nations. So I want to locate myself within the geography of peoples: the people I come from, where I live, and how I got here. What kind of relatives have we been?
For most of my life, I lived in Delaware on the east coast of the United States. Looking back, I cannot imagine writing the book had I stayed there. In 2000, I moved to Minnesota in the upper Midwest. Minnesota is an international hotbed for restorative practices, restorative justice, and peacemaking Circles. I also learned that this is Dakota homeland, and I learned from Dakota people some of the history of what happened here. My work has evolved through dialogues with friends and colleagues from these two groups: the restorative justice community and the Indigenous community, many of whom are members of the Oceti Sakowin Oyate, the Seven Fires Nation/People.

To start, I want to acknowledge the Elders, ancestors, and members today of the Oceti Sakowin Oyate as the First People and traditional owners of the land I live on as I write. Only a few miles from me is Bdote, the joining of the Mississippi and the Minnesota rivers. It is the place of genesis for the Wahpetunwan, Sisitunwan, Wahpekute, and Bdewakantunwan Peoples. It also became the place of their genocide. I honor the Oceti Sakowin Oyate as the Original People—the “traditional custodians”—of the place where I live.

Beginning this way expresses respect for the Indigenous Dakota inhabitants of this land—past, present, and future. This is not something I was raised to do. Wherever I have gone, my first thought has not been “Whose land am I standing on?” and “What happened so that I can be here?” I learned instead the mindset of colonizers: I belong to the winning group, so the land is ours—period.

Colonization is win-lose thinking writ large. If we want to know where a win-lose mindset leads, colonization shows us. Think of the movie Avatar without the ending—without the colonizers being defeated and sent back, so the Na’vi can rebuild. Since
Europeans came to North America, colonization stands as the First Harm and the longest-running one. Colonization is win-lose thinking’s juggernaut: its social, economic, and geo-political engine for winning by crushing those in its path—without end. Colonization institutionalizes winning by doing harm throughout a society and makes it a way of life for a people.

My ancestors are not indigenous to this continent or hemisphere; they came here, settled here, and participated in all that colonization required of them. Indigenous scholars explain that colonization requires two specific wins: extracting the wealth from Indigenous lands for the benefit of colonizers, not Indigenous Peoples; and claiming Indigenous lands so that settlers and their descendants, not Indigenous people and their descendants, can occupy it. Both wins involve land, and my people have done both: we have extracted resources for our people’s benefit only, and we have made our invasion, occupation, and settlement stick by excluding Indigenous Peoples. These actions have given me the life, privileges, and benefits that I enjoy today; they have also given me the role of settler-colonizer.

My people did not have to come here through colonization. We did not have to choose the win-lose approach to frame our relations with this land’s Original Peoples. Coexistence was and remains an option that Indigenous Peoples understand, practice, and prefer. Of course, for Indigenous Peoples as for anyone, peaceful coexistence is never easy or a given. It is an ongoing commitment. Conflicts come with being human, and sometimes even the best efforts involve tragedy. Nonetheless, Indigenous philosophies include more options than winning by annihilating others. Negotiation, diplomacy, treaties, trusting each other’s word, and being trustworthy: these are Indigenous practices.

Europeans knew these practices too, but we chose not to use them with Indigenous Nations, because we refused to recognize them as equal human beings, possessed of inherent rights. That way, we could claim their land was not theirs and steal it. Keeping land stolen by dehumanizing others, we keep the same dehumanizing narrative going. The lust for land eclipses our ethics, and so we have treaties that we have no intention of keeping. Racism dehumanizes some groups to justify harming them for another people’s multigenerational benefit. It serves the choice to use colonization (win-lose) rather than coexistence (being good relatives) as our approach. We began our journey on North America by committing the First Harm and used racism to keep it going. Anyone here who is not Indigenous benefits from this First Harm, which is still in play.

Colonization’s writ-large win-lose drama also writes small. The politics of colonization are personal for both colonizer and colonized. So I want to share a little of my family’s history to show what settler-colonizing looks like up close and personal. It is more than pulling the trigger or giving a community smallpox-infected blankets.
My ancestors are mostly from Brittany, Cornwall, Ireland, and Scotland—at one time European Indigenous Peoples and at one time invaded and colonized by the Romans and later by the English and the French. I also have Swedish, Norwegian, and African ancestries. Yes, according to DNA testing and the “one drop rule,” I am Black U.S. American. But I have been raised, as were my parents, to be White U.S. American—immigrant settlers on this continent.

My mother’s great grandparents (on her mother’s father’s side) fled the potato famine in Donegal, Ireland, and became homesteaders in Arlington, South Dakota. Homesteading was one of many schemes the U.S. devised to invade, occupy, and steal Native land. A dresser sits in my mother’s bedroom that came to the Midwest in a covered wagon. Her mother’s mother’s family traces our ancestry back to the 1600s and, one document claims, to a signer of the Mayflower Compact. This side of the family tree includes men and women who killed Native people in the long history of land-wars against Native Nations and who fought in the War of Independence from Britain, the Civil War, as well as in World War I, World War II, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. It also includes a great uncle whose descendants found, after his funeral, Ku Klux Klan (KKK) literature stashed in his attic. An uncle and a cousin in Minnesota held anti-Native views and used racist stereotypes and language in family conversations.

My mother’s father came straight from a family of miners in Cornwall, England, to Sisseton, South Dakota, to be a Presbyterian minister and missionary at a church located on the Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota Nation’s homeland. During World War II, he went to Whitehorse, Yukon, to help build the Alaska Canada Highway.
My father’s father’s family emigrated from Bretagne to Quebec and then to northern Michigan; I do not know when, but they were established in Quebec before they emigrated to the U.S. Sometime during the nineteenth century, his mother’s family emigrated from Norway and Sweden to Ontario and then down into Michigan as well. My grandfather became a miner and eventually a mining engineer. He and his brothers mined for gold in the Western U.S. and Canada. I am not sure where, though I know some of their mining camps were in Oceti Sakowin Oyate territory.

For several years, my grandfather also worked for Anaconda Copper Mining in the Andean mountains and high plateaus of southern Chile, where my father was born. When my father was four or five, the family witnessed an Indigenous labor organizer, who was working against the enslavement of Indigenous workers in the mines, being dragged through the streets. The miners were most likely members of the Aymaras and Atacameños Indigenous Peoples.
Indigenous struggles against the copper mining industry continue. Here, protestors walk a 44-mile journey from the San Carlos Apache Nation’s office to protect their ancestral lands at Oak Flat campground area from a massive copper mine project. They intend to occupy the Oak Flat area for "however long it takes." Photo by Kenneth Chan, 5 February 2015.

Oak Flat scenery in Arizona, ancestral sacred land for Apache Nations. Photo by Kenneth Chan, 7 February 2015.

Pilgrims, Native killers, military men, homesteaders, missionaries, road builders, miners, and mining engineers, as well as KKK supporters and Native haters: for those who know the history, my forebears have been not just immigrants but active agents of colonization on this hemisphere. They focused their time and energies on carrying out both “settler colonialism” and “extractive colonialism,” and they have not veiled or sugarcoated the racism that fuels the First Harm and keeps it going.

How my forebears engaged the settler-colonizer role changed. One grandfather, the minister-missionary, gave it up and became an interior painter for a hotel in Minneapolis until the Depression hit, when he joined the ranks of the unemployed. My other grandfather, the mining engineer, gave it up and started Breton’s Coffee Shop in
Winter Haven, Florida. He left the “extractive colonizing” in Chile—extracting mineral resources—to resume his role of “settler colonizing” in the U.S., selling coffee, ice cream, and my grandmother’s desserts.

Colonizing Comes Home: Private Property and Killing Indigenous Peoples

The story goes on. When my mother and I moved to Minnesota in 2000, we bought a house—a “homestead.” Private property, a pillar of U.S. law, is a win-lose construct: I have, you do not. Backed by the state, private property means the power to exclude. In their book, Settler, Emma Battell Lowman and Adam J. Barker, who self-identify as Settler Canadians, explain how settler colonizing permeates such normalized actions among settlers as buying a house:

When Settler Canadians buy a house in the suburbs, we are doing more than engaging in a private financial transaction: we are purchasing the idea of that land as ours—our own circumscribed space with attendant amenities like a backyard and privacy fences. Our purchase is a benefit of our placement on the inside of the structures of settler colonialism, and also a denial of Indigenous claims to those same lands.²

Their words hit home for me. They also hit home for those who are not secure in having a home. How can we as a people meet the universal need for home and livelihood? Is private property the best way to do it? For one thing, private property follows privilege: it is built on who wins and who loses. Those most privileged are most home secure; those down in the win-lose hierarchy are less secure, often living in bad housing or facing homelessness. A 2014 study found that one in every thirty U.S. children—an estimated 2.5 million young people—were homeless that year.³ Private property works for those who have it; the settler construct is unforgiving for those who do not.

Another problem is that private property—personal and corporate—is human centric. The peoples of the natural world need homes too: we call their homes “habitats.” Our practice of private property has largely entitled humans to disregard natural world needs for and rights to habitats. Human owners’ accountability to others—any others—comes only with struggle. A win-lose approach assumes that human owners should be able to do whatever we want with “our property.”

Worst of all, a win-lose approach turns a basic need—home and livelihood—into a reason to fight and kill. The win-lose construct of private property has been a site of conflicts, harms, and injustices—wars, ethnic cleansings, and genocide. And by destroying habitats and dumping toxins into the commons, win-driven uses of private property have led to environmental catastrophes: dying streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans, pollinator die-offs, and the largest mass species extinction in 60-some million years.
Here again, we can change our philosophy and choices about home, land, and sustenance. When the U.S. Constitution was written, private property included humans. Just as we challenge the idea that humans can be property—and this struggle is not over—so too can we evolve beyond a win-lose approach to other ways of meeting the common need for home and resources.

In his 1609 Address to Captain John Smith, Wahunsenacawh Powhatan, leader of Tsenacommacah and father of Pocahontas, argued that coexistence on a land base, rooted in friendship, trust, and love, makes for a much better life on both sides. He asked, "Why should you take by force from us that which you can have by love?" He went on to say:

Why should you destroy us who have provided you with food? What can you get by war? We can hide our provisions and fly into the woods. And then you must consequently famish by wrong-doing your friends.

What is the cause of your jealousy? You see us unarmed and willing to supply your wants if you come in a friendly manner; not with swords and guns as to invade an enemy. I am not so simple as not to know that it is better to eat good meat, lie well, and sleep quietly with my women and children; to laugh and be merry with the English, and, being their friend, to have copper, hatchets, and whatever else I want, than to fly from all, to lie cold in the woods, feed upon acorns, roots and such trash, and to be so hunted that I cannot rest, eat, or sleep. In such circumstances, my men must watch, and if a twig should but break, all would cry out, "Here comes Captain Smith." And so, in this miserable manner to end my miserable life. And, Captain Smith, this might soon be your fate too through your rashness and unadvisedness.

I, therefore, exhort you to peaceable councils, and above all I insist that the guns and swords, the cause of all our jealousy and uneasiness, be removed and sent away.4

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4 Wahunsenacawh Powhatan, leader of Tsenacommacah, whom the English called Chief Powhatan (1545–1618). This statue is located at Williamsburg, James City County Courthouse. Copyright: <a href='https://www.123rf.com/profile_americanspirit'>americanspirit / 123RF Stock Photo</a>.
Technology has changed since 1609, but the dynamics have not. Today’s news is filled with refugees, people eating trash, and everyone on the alert for “the sound of a twig breaking.” Hypervigilance, PTSD, anxiety, trauma, and exhaustion are common mental states, not only among peoples and adults but among children as well. At a restorative practices conference, a teacher told me she left elementary school because the children’s trauma levels were so high. She went to middle school and found they were higher: “I just want to teach, but all I do is deal with their trauma.” Because we have chosen not to follow Wahunsenacawh’s advice, his warning has become our reality: trauma and violence are now our fate.

Evidently, our experiences in Europe imprinted the win-lose approach too deeply on our collective psyche, and land issues trigger the mindset. When land and resources are at stake, win-lose struggles escalate to violence. In An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States, Texas-born historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz explains how killing Indigenous Peoples quickly defined the U.S. American character precisely because of settlers’ goal to steal Indigenous lands: "Settler colonialism is a genocidal policy," she writes, because land is life.5 "Settler colonialism, as an institution or system, requires violence or the threat of violence to attain its goals. People do not hand over their land, resources, children, and futures without a fight, and that fight is met with violence."6 In 1873, General William T. Sherman spoke for U.S. Americans when he wrote, "We must act with vindictive earnestness against the Sioux [Oceti Sakowin Oyate], even to their extermination, men, women and children ... [D]uring an assault, the soldiers can not pause to distinguish between male and female, or even discriminate as to age."7
Again, we do not have to fire the guns to be complicit in genocide. As a people, we have carried out genocide institutionally and continuously, so that European, U.S. American, and Canadian descendants, not Indigenous descendants, populate and control North America’s land base. Win-lose thinking, operating as colonization, has instilled in us the notion that success lies in destroying what is indigenous, from peoples to nations to species, forests to mountains to rivers. For win-lose, colonizer thinking, "indigenous" means a source of vast riches, an obstacle to their possession, and a license to destroy: indigenous means exploitable and expendable.

The agenda to steal Indigenous lands continues. Pres. Donald Trump, a White man, threatens to "privatize" all Native reservations, so corporations can exploit their oil, gas, minerals, timber, and other resources unrestrained. In 2016, North Dakota’s governor, Gov. Jack Dalrymple, another White man, spent $22 million on militarized police in full combat gear, complete with tanks, guns, missile launchers, and water cannons, to intimidate and attack the Indigenous Water Protectors and their allies at Standing Rock, who were opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline to be built under the Missouri River. Police from all over the country responded to the governor’s call for reinforcements. In May 2017, the U.S. Congress allocated $15 million to reimburse North Dakota for its all-out, high-tech force. One thing is clear: U.S. settler society is fully ready to use lethal measures against Indigenous people—to threaten the land’s Original Peoples with prison, massacre, and genocide—when land and resources are at stake.

From Plymouth in the 1600s to the house I live in today, then, my family and I have participated in a win-lose approach to being on a land base that rightly belongs to Indigenous Peoples. If that sounds too radical, outside law and logic, then consider the legality of where I live: the Pike Treaty of 1805, by which the U.S. supposedly obtained from the Dakota Oyate the land on which the Twin Cities in Minnesota now sit, is wholly invalid according to both Dakota and U.S. treaty standards: it is a fraud. In such cases, land ownership rightly reverts to the original owners, the Dakota Peoples.

I love my forebears and relatives. They have given me life, and I am grateful to them. Who they were as human beings includes much more than I have described. Had I lived when they did, I may well have chosen as they did. Then again, if some of my ancestors lived today, they may be striving to choose differently, as I am. We are caught in a win-lose set-up, and the system generates the mindset and behavior. It is hard to stand against it. Big as it seems, though, the win-lose set-up is in our power to change. Our collective assent—something we create together—is all that keeps it going. It has no force apart from our choice to see the world this way and organize our societies accordingly.
Exercising Choice: Is This Who We Want to Be?

Alongside our history of using force and violence to "win," we—settler-colonizers—have developed a narrative about being good people. But what about the contradiction that good people do not steal, kill, enslave, or commit genocide and then act as if we did not do these things? If being good people is a value for us, then goodness calls us to reckon with how we got here and work to put things right. “You cannot get to a good place in a bad way,” Chief Justice Robert Yazzie of the Navajo Supreme Court, now retired, says. Putting things right moves us out of self-images and into truths and realities. Vernà Myers, African American diversity consultant, tells White people that realities are what matter: “Stop trying to be ‘good people.’ We need real people.”

We come to choice again: at any time, we can say, “No! We must put these wrongs right.” Such a choice would have changed U.S. history, because it would have changed us. Repairing harms has a transformative effect. Not words but actions rewrite our psyche's DNA, liberating us from self-concepts so that we can be real. Whereas doing whatever it takes to win warps us in one direction, repairing harms transforms us in the other. Win-lose thinking loses its hold on us when we see what it does to others and then when we work with others to put things right. Repairing the mass harms in our origins and in our present holds the power to rewrite our DNA as a people. We would not be in such deep struggle with the win-driven mindset today if we had said "No!" to it generations before.

Some White U.S. Americans advocated that we do this—generations ago. In 1881, for example, White author Helen Hunt Jackson wrote *A Century of Dishonor: A Sketch of the United States Government’s Dealings with Some of the Indian Tribes*. Then in 1936, White author Angie Debo completed a similar exposé of U.S. harms against Native nations, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes*. Described as “a crushing analysis of the corruption, moral depravity, and criminal activity that underlay white administration and execution of the allotment policy,” the book cost Angie Debo her academic career. She was blacklisted. As for Helen Hunt Jackson, her object in writing was “to show our causes for national shame in the matter of our treatment of the Indians.” She went on to say, “It is a shame which the American nation ought not to lie under, for the American people, as a people, are not at heart unjust.”

![Angie Debo, White U.S. American historian and author (1890–1988). This statue of her was sculpted by Phyllis Mantik and installed in November 2010 at the Stillwater Public Library, Stillwater, Oklahoma. Photo by Lynda Reynolds. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.](image)

Helen Hunt Jackson is not wrong about us, but our choice to fixate on winning “trumps” our desire to be just. During the 2016 campaign, for example, Pres. Trump gave voice to what our behavior as a people has been from the start—both the drive to win and the racism, since they go hand in hand. Unchallenged and unrepaired, our First Harm has programmed us to think only of winning and so has made subsequent race-based harms inevitable. Doing violence to racial others has been the winning formula for the U.S. and White people. Instead of holding ourselves accountable for harms and transforming
ourselves through their repair, we have devised new ways to win by committing more harms, spinning racism anew rather than ending it. We dig ourselves in deeper.

Enter slavery—the Second Harm, the colossal harm that our theft of Indigenous lands made possible. We needed labor to profit from newly stolen land and resources: big profits require free labor. If we as a people can commit catastrophic harms against Indigenous Peoples and get away with them, what harms are off limits? No human, land, nation, or species is safe from winners’ predation. Slavery proves this, and, like the First Harm, the Second Harm has not ended, just morphed into new forms over centuries: convict leasing, Jim Crow laws, sharecropping, White terrorism through race riots and lynchings, mass incarceration, prison labor, police and citizen murders of unarmed Black citizens, and discriminatory education, housing, and employment practices. The Second Harm keeps African U.S. Americans as a people less secure in body, home, wealth, and livelihood, therefore more vulnerable, stuck in futures framed by racism and oppression.

Slavery as a means to mass profits is very much alive today. Globally, peoples of color, including millions of children, are enslaved in factories that produce for virtually nothing what corporations sell for billions. Win-lose thinking is a business calculation: maximize profits by cutting costs, and personnel/labor is the biggest cost. Such cost-benefit analyses conclude, for example, that it is cheaper for corporations to pay damages to the families of garment workers burned or crushed in death-trap factories than to make foreign clothing factories safe.¹⁴

A now famous, award-winning photo: "A Final Embrace." "Two victims amid the rubble of a garment factory building collapse in Savar, near Dhaka, Bangladesh." Savar Rana Plaza garment factory was characterized as a "death trap" and proved to be so for the 1,138...
garment workers who were killed, 2,515 injured, when the unsafe building collapsed. Photo by Taslima Akhter, 25 April 2013. Included with permission from Taslima Akhter, Bangladesh, photo journalist and activist for workers’ and women’s rights.

The U.S. is, of course, not the only win-driven, colonizing society, now or in history. Ours is not the only modern state or people to commit multiple holocausts. Our history does, however, position us as a people to ask ourselves: What philosophy led us to make these choices, and do we want to continue this way? Is depending on committing harms a way to survive? Does the settler-colonizer, win-driven role make us who we want to be? Most of all, does it generate the life and world we want for our children?

Becoming "More Than That"

We do not teach our children about the racist, violent, unjust, murderous sides of our history and their ongoing realities for a reason. They are horrific, and they call for just repair. Yet our silence robs us of the chance to do this and thereby to become more than we have been. Self-change is a power human beings possess, but we need to know how things really are and how we got here before we can engage in self-transformation. Confronting the harms of win-lose behaviors loosens the philosophy's hold on us. Collective self-knowledge and truth-telling free us to make better choices as peoples. We as humans have the gift of self-change, but we need to get real to do it. Whereas secrets, silences, and lies cost us our self-evolution, truth-telling frees us to change.

White anti-death-penalty activist Sister Helen Prejean says, “We are all more than the worst thing we have ever done.” Love sees how we have behaved at our worst and then opens spaces for us to put things right precisely by acknowledging our power to be more. Through the process, we learn and change. Big wrongs open a door to big learning, big transformation, and big love. Whether we go through the door is our call.

These perspectives have moved me to write Harm-Dependent No More, and it is long. If I am calling into question a pillar of Western thought, which win-lose thinking is, then I need to lay out the argument, even though the story can be told in just a few pages. Win-lose thinking or being good relatives: this is basic stuff, and yet, simple as it is, we do not talk much about the choices we have here. Instead, following a harm-dependent approach without much question, we create worlds filled with harms and trauma. What else might we expect? Win-lose thinking normalizes harm; it tells us to accept doing harm as a way of life. It does not tell us what a narrow way this is for engaging the vast universe of interrelated being that is our life and that enables us to be here at all.

Rethinking our philosophy and our choices is, as Epictetus advised, how we turn things around. We have the power to do this—we all do. Just as we each contribute to
keeping this approach going by believing in it and acting on it, so we can each stop, rethink, and withdraw our support. This emperor has no clothes.

To critique my own people’s patterns of thought and behavior, then, is not an act of self-hate or toxic shaming but an act of love, trust, and hope. The roles of colonizers, destroyers, oppressors, slavers, haters, and genocidaires do not exhaust who we can be. Acknowledging personal complicity and collective guilt is constructive: it opens us to repairing harms, engaging in self-change, and transforming our relations. Owning our histories brings self-awareness, and this self-honesty makes our self-evolution as persons and as peoples possible, even likely.

Sr. Helen Prejean with Robert Lee Willie at his Pardon Board hearing, November 1984. Willie was killed in the electric chair on 28 December 1984. This experience initiated Helen Prejean’s lifelong activism against the death penalty. She wrote about her experience with Mr. Willie in her book, _Dead Man Walking_, which also became a movie. Credit: Gary Hunter and State-Times Morning Advocate, Photograph of Sr. Helen Prejean and Robert Lee Willie at His Pardon Board Hearing, November 1984, Sr. Helen Prejean Papers, Box 83, Special Collections and Archives, DePaul University, Chicago, IL. Photograph reproduced with the permission of The Advocate, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

I write, then, from the love, trust, and hope that my people, along with many other peoples, are in the grips of such a process. We are taking our final exams, so to speak. What can we learn from our 500-year journey on this hemisphere? What different approaches might serve our survival today? Can we love ourselves as more than the worst things we have done as a people? And what capacities for self-change can we unlock for ourselves today by repairing harms that reach back to our origins on this land base?
Win-lose thinking told us we had to commit horrific harms to survive. It was never true. For humans, survival means coexistence, and engaging all beings as relatives “in a good way,” as many Indigenous peoples say, is how we do it.

In October 2011, White TV journalist Diane Sawyer produced an ABC special, “Children of the Plains,” which depicted only poverty, gangs, violence, and addictions in Native communities. Students of two classes at Todd County High School on the Sicangu Tituwan homeland, known as the Rosebud Sioux Reservation, responded with a YouTube video, “We are so much ‘more than that.”’ In the video, students named the many values and resources that they draw on—relationship, community, moral, and spiritual values, qualities of character, hopes and dreams, as well as Lakota knowledge, language, ceremony, ethics, and traditions. “We have so much more than poverty.” The ways they name are the ways of coexistence. For humans, these are the ways of survival, proven over millennia by Indigenous Peoples and encoded in their cultures. They are good ways, they give us a good way to be, and they give us futures worth living.

With these students, then, we stand at a door open to who we can be—as relatives, yes, but even more, as good relatives.

Shania Black Bear and Brendan Black Bear, Lakota, are cousins and, as students of Todd County High School, participated in making the 12 December 2011 YouTube video, "More Than That." Photo used with the permission of Shania Black Bear and Brendan Black Bear, as well as of Heather Hanson and Kim Bos, the teachers involved.

Thank you.
Notes

1. The genealogy document I saw traces my maternal grandmother’s family to Isaac Allerton, who signed the Mayflower Compact at the age of 34. Allerton was banished from Plymouth Colony for making himself wealthy at the colony’s expense.

If my DNA test is accurate, 5 percent of my ancestors are African or African U.S. American. The DNA test also said I was 4 percent Native, but that result is inconclusive. The genetics between Europeans and Natives are too similar, and the margin of error is +/- 12 percent. For European and African genes, however, the margin of error is only +/- 3 percent, so it is certain that I have African ancestors.


6. Ibid., 8.


