Rigged and Ruthless

In October 2010, Amnesty International reported that Papua New Guinea citizens living near the Porgera gold mine have been coming home to burned homes and suffering violence. The mine is 95 percent owned and operated by subsidiaries of the largest gold mining company in the world, the Canadian-based Barrick Gold Corporation, as part of the Porgera Joint Venture (PJV). And so, for nearly a decade, women have been raped, men and boys beaten, people have been killed, and their livestock have been slaughtered. The message is clear: “Leave your home—or else.”

Resident of Wuangima with the charred remains of her house. “Papua New Guinea: Police set hundreds of homes ablaze near Porgera gold mine.” © Amnesty International. 2010. Licensed under CC.
What is the thinking here? Harm-dependent? Obviously. For land and wealth? Of course. To gain power and control? Yes, that too. But looking past these motives, what is driving this? What is the thinking?

A simple philosophy drives the behavior. We have heard its story and seen it played out from our earliest years. It now shapes how we see the world and is for us an unquestioned part of life. It is the win-lose story.

As a game, competition can be fun. It gets the adrenalin going. People cheer. But games have rules of fairness. We play them by free, mutual consent. The playing field is level: power is balanced. Impartial referees ensure fair play, or players and teams are out.

These conditions seldom hold in the real world. Rules of fairness are not the experience of those who are poor, colonized, and oppressed. Fairness and free choice are not the historical experiences of people of color. However “not fun” the real-world “game” is, though, no one is free to opt out. People of color cannot say to society, “This game is rigged. I think I’ll pass.”

And rigged it is. The playing field is dramatically un-level, and power imbalances are extreme. The corrupting use of power and money eliminates impartial referees. No impartial referees have stepped in to ensure fairness for those whose differences US society has marked as negative. Imperialism, colonization, White supremacy, genocide, and slavery are the logical culminations of the win-lose story. Yet the fair-game model is often used to justify the win-lose narrative and to divert attention from how it actually operates in the real world.

Even on the game model, though, happy winners describe only a fraction of those involved. Given a pool of 100 competitors in a contest, often only one team or one person (or at most a couple others) is allowed to “win.” All the rest—99 percent—lose. The division of society into the 1 percent and the 99 percent reflects the win-lose logic by which our society operates. If we embrace the win-lose narrative, why should we expect a different outcome? This raises the question, how useful is a social philosophy that operates by excluding the vast majority of society from its benefits?
Fear of Losing Makes Us Crazy to Win

Nonetheless, the win-lose story runs deep. Part of its roots lie in our brain’s makeup, which incorporates win-lose responses that we share with some of the oldest species. Part of it is the Darwinian “struggle for survival” narrative about the evolution of life. And part of it is our social conditioning to be competitive—to win by beating someone else. Fears about losing and of “becoming a loser” are pervasive. These fears overlay our lives with stress, blindness to more than “the win,” and extreme behaviors.

For example, when Bill Moyers asked Karl Marlantes, a highly decorated White Marine veteran of the Vietnam war, about how he went “from being a Yale graduate, a Rhodes scholar, a nice guy from Oregon to a killing machine,” Marlantes recalled an incident from boot camp:

[T]he Marines have something called pugil sticks. They’re large staves.... And they teach you how to fight another person with these....

And you’ve got a whole bunch of people in a circle around you. And when we were in high school, we used to have kids fight like that.... It was identical. And I remember saying, “Okay, one of us is going to lose.” And I just went wild.... I think I terrified the guy....

I think I won, because I just started screaming. I just let this stuff out. And I’ll tell you, it was an unbelievable feeling, this raw, raw animal that had been sitting there a long time. I mean, it was just, it felt wonderful. I just beat the hell out of this guy....
And I went, “Wow, that felt good.” And it was like suddenly I didn’t care if I hurt him. One of us was going to lose and one of us was going to win. And that’s all that went through my mind.²


In his book, What It’s Like to Go to War, Karl Marlantes described the win-lose world he later faced in Vietnam and the behavior his training prepared him to carry out: "It was all absurd, without reason or meaning. People who didn’t know each other were going to kill each other over a hill none of them cared about." Winning required it.
Win-lose is not the only narrative-option for our species, yet we act as if it were. We get stuck in a loop. The dominant win-lose setup keeps going because we go along with it. And we go along with it because, looking at a win-lose society, we conclude that the narrative is our only option and cannot be changed.

As long as we stay in this self-reinforcing loop, we may protest and object. We may want the suffering side to stop. But deep down, we assume that winning and losing are the name of the game. When we hear about harms, we cannot imagine fixing or stopping them, because we assume this is how the world works. As long as we are not the ones being harmed, the Sec. Ritchie in us falls asleep.

If the win/lose story is our only option and what society believes, then we damn well better be winners. However, if the win-lose story is not our only option, how do we break out of the loop?

For starters, we can think the unthinkable: What if much better stories are out there for us to live by? And what if our make-up as human beings longs to tell stories more fitted to who we are?

Again, how we think matters. Tremendous resources go into trying to influence how we think, and many of these energies focus on inculcating win-lose patterns. The US military and weapons industries know the power of “managing” public perception to achieve their goals. Convincing us to think in win-lose terms is key to selling a military response. Sports is another money-maker dependent on win-lose thinking. John Stauber, White founder and executive director of the Center for Media and Democracy, states, “I believe that the ultimate battlefield really is in the mind.”
Psywar: The real battlefield is the mind. *Metanoia documentary film. Image courtesy of Scott Noble.*

What self-defense do we have against such society-wide propaganda for this particular philosophy? Critical thinking. In the film *Psywar*, Stauber states that mind-control loses power over us the more we “think critically [and] ask questions.” In *Punished by Rewards*, White educator Alfie Kohn, comes to similar conclusions:

Most things that we and the people around us do constantly ... have come to seem so natural and inevitable that merely to pose the question, ‘Why are we doing this?’ can strike us as perplexing—and also, perhaps, a little unsettling. On general principle, it is a good idea to challenge ourselves in this way about anything we have come to take for granted; the more habitual, the more valuable this line of inquiry.
When the “ultimate battlefield is the mind,” we need to become philosophical warriors. This is not all we need to do, but it is something we each can do. We can shift our mind’s software. Shifting our software changes the game. “First and foremost, decolonization must occur in our own minds…. Waziyatawin writes, “The project that begins with our minds … has revolutionary potential.”

For the philosophical struggle, we have left-brain powers: critical thinking, research, knowledge, truth-telling, and a drive for justice. We have right-brain powers too: vision, passion, imagination, creativity, big-picture, holistic thinking, empathy, compassion, trust, and a passion for good relationships. Our brains have the power to come up with more than this one narrative, the win-lose one. And we have Soul force to provide the overriding compass. Our connection to all that is gives us an innate sense of respect and love for all life, which win-lose thinking violates constantly.

We come back to the call to be human: our powers as human beings give us the means to make different stories our reality.
The Call to Occupy Our Cerebral Cortex: The Triune Brain

Being human involves using the brains we have—the fuller the use, the better. This is a good place to start to reframe the role that win-lose thinking has in human life. In 1990, neuroscientist Paul D. MacLean proposed a theory of a triune brain. Incorporating the evolution of life, the human brain has three basic areas with skills distinct to each:

- a reptilian area (the brain stem or hindbrain): survival;
- mammalian areas (the midbrain and the limbic system in the forebrain): emotions; and
- the more distinctly human, cognitive areas (the forebrain, especially the cerebral cortex surrounding the forebrain): speech, logic, higher-order thinking, including critical thinking and self-change skills.

Thanks to our triune brains, humans possess capacities that range from the earliest survival behaviors of reptiles to the emotional bonding of mammals to the complex cognitive and self-evolving skills of humans. All these behaviors have value. Because humans possess all these abilities, our species’ challenge is to learn how to use them in balance appropriate to our species, in service to our nature, and in support of our species’ survival.

Since MacLean proposed this theory in his book, The Triune Brain in Evolution, brain researchers have continued to map the brain and its functions, using medical scanning technologies. Not all parts of the human brain fit neatly into the triune scheme. Plus, animal behaviors are proving to be much more complex than his theory indicates. Still, the triune brain offers a useful model for discussing the range of human abilities, from brain stem to forebrain.

The triune brain theory may more accurately describe three sets of behaviors that have developed through evolution. What scientists label as reptilian, mammalian, and human abilities refers to three ways of solving adaptive challenges that emerged during different periods of life’s development. Adaptive challenges arise when the old ways are not working for a group or species. Either an existing species must change its ways or a new species emerges, designed to meet the challenges.

During the reptilian era when dinosaurs roamed the Earth, survival had to do with defending territory, asserting dominance through hierarchies, being aggressive and fighting, engaging in rituals for courtship and mating, and eating. The big question was, “Can I eat it, or will it eat me?” Fighting to kill and eat and fleeing to avoid being eaten were the skill-sets to have. Pondering complexities was not helpful: seeing life in simple options made for the best pro-survival response.

When mammals came onto the scene, the emerging skill-sets focused on building bonds, mostly with similar others, especially within the family and with young. The new skills included nurturing, engaging in reciprocal exchanges, and learning how to build social groups. Emotions emerged. Observing mammals can reveal the roots of many
protocols of respect, manners, and politeness—i.e., ways of maintaining positive social relations. Mammals can fight or flee with the best of them: win-lose dramas are part of their lives too. But these are not the skill-sets that mammals distinctly developed or contributed to the collective memory or behavioral "DNA" of evolving life.

Since humans emerged, our distinct contribution to the story of life lies with our powers of mind: advanced cognition, planning, modeling, simulating, communicating through language and symbols, and engaging in self-change. Our minds give our species greater capacities to meet adaptive challenges. We possess immense powers to think, to build complex societies, to communicate our thoughts, and to choose how we act based on abstract concepts and diverse modes of thinking. We are also makers of our own brains: our brains change until the day we die according to how we choose to use them.
All these are, as far as scientists can tell, distinctly human skill-sets for solving adaptive challenges. Our brains give us considerable latitude for changing our ways as circumstances require. And sometimes our own stage of development causes problems that only self-evolving to a further stage can solve. We become our own spur to evolve.

So what does the triune brain approach suggest about win-lose thinking?

The ancient brain composed of our brain stem—our reptilian brain, so-called—is where the win-lose story, according to current theories, resides in us. Addictions seem to reside here too. Brain-wise, it makes sense, then, that those who are hyper-hooked into win-lose thinking tend to be addictive, both about winning and about other addictions. When societies reward their members for using this area of our brains—win-driven responses repeatedly—harm follows. We end up behaving like reptiles on steroids—T-Rex—without empathy or conscience.

This is a narrow use, if not a misuse, of our brain stem's powers, since the real interest of our most ancient brain is survival. The win-lose model offers no guarantee of survival. Win-lose fights are actually a last resort in the natural world, since the stakes are so high. Instead, our species' challenge is to balance our brain's most basic survival functions—regulating breathing, heartbeat, posture, sleeping, and arousal—with other functions of the human brain. The more skillfully we do this, the more this oldest brain has a chance of fulfilling its real function, which is to ensure human life—individual, group, and species survival. Humans need our cerebral cortex, forebrain, and midbrain to pull this off. On its own, our reptilian brain stem, especially the win-lose piece, does not have the response-repertoire that our species needs to survive.

The midbrain and parts of our forebrain connect us with our mammalian capacities: nurturing our young, creating families, and building strong bonds of community with similar others. We learn the skills of being relatives, which develop our powers of empathy. We bond with those like us.

But narratives that stop here get us in trouble as well. We fight for our group. This leads to wars like those the Six Nations experienced before they became the
Haudenosaunee Confederacy and like the wars we see across the world today and in history. To meet this adaptive challenge, we need to change our ways, and that, once again, lies with being human—fully so.

What is most distinctly human about our brain is our forebrain and especially our large cerebral cortex, which makes up 80 percent of our brain’s volume. These parts of our brains give us the high-level processing powers we need to connect, cooperate, and form relationships not only with those who are like us but also with those who are different. We develop relationships with humans who are not like us, and we form relationships with animals, plants, and places—every facet of the Earth and the natural world. This is the teaching that the Peacemaker brought: he taught the People to combine empathy, compassion, and a desire to live with “good thoughts” and rational thinking, so that they could develop a "Good Mind." The Good Mind enabled them to live in peace.

Jane Goodall, English primatologist, ethologist, and UN Messenger of Peace, has formed bonds with all kinds of animals, most notably primates. Her relationship with Rusty, a dog she grew up with, awakened in her a lifelong passion to acknowledge and connect with the minds, personalities, and emotions of animals. "Jane Goodall explores a wetland with a friend." Photo by William Waterway, 5 August 2006. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

The more we strive to form balanced, sustainable bonds across differences, the more our potentials as humans emerge. Differences challenge our brains’ powers, and this
enhances our cognition, learning, and awareness. Processing differences stimulates our minds and spurs creativity. Embracing differences makes us more human—more connected with our brain’s distinctly human powers. The most creative periods of growth often occur when differences interact—different genders, disciplines, ethnicities, cultures, peoples, nationalities, and species. Reaching out to the natural world as a relative is an ancient human response to adaptive challenges, and Indigenous peoples have practiced this for millennia.

Many ancient and Indigenous cultures have developed profound 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.
The relationship the Titunwan People have with the Buffalo People goes far beyond food, clothing, and housing. Their ancestral relationship is cultural and spiritual. "Provider for the Lakota People." Photo by Jimmy Emerson, DVM, Custer, South Dakota, 24 June 2014. Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

**Humans: Born to Be Mindful Relatives**

Our brain is built to do more than fight and win by destroying others. Making losers of others is not the special gift our species brings to the story of life. Granted, win-lose dramas are seductive. But in matters of greatest import to humans—intimacy, family, and community relations, or political, social, economic, or environmental harmony and balance—the model fails us. Further, as a story that can mirror to us who we are and provide a framework for meaning, the narrative fails utterly. R. Buckminster Fuller, White US American systems thinker, said, “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.” We can put the win-lose story in its place, because our brains already have.
Within the sweep of evolutionary skill-sets, humans are born to be mindful relatives—mammals with a big brain. Humans are relatives not only by instinct but also by intentionality: we use our minds to decide how to be relatives. Being a relative carries responsibilities, and we need our full powers as humans to hold up our end. This is the “new” story that humans are here to write.

The late Kenyan environmentalist and Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai (1940–2011) founded the Green Belt Movement, which has planted 30 million trees in Africa. She modeled being a mindful relative with Earth and the natural world, and by so doing, being a mindful relative to human communities as well. Here, Wangari Maathai plants trees in the degraded Aberdare Forest, Kenya. Photo by Lisa Merton. Courtesy of “Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai.”
Relative to all species, humans are the newest, and learning how to be mindful relatives is the new ability that humans bring. But "new" is in quotes for another reason. Becoming mindful relatives is a new paradigm for many modern, Westernized societies, but it is not new for Earth’s oldest cultures. Long-time observers of the natural world, Indigenous Peoples have recognized that what humans have to offer is different from other species and that it has to do with using our minds to be related in good ways with all those around us. Many Indigenous cultures have developed knowledge, philosophies, and traditional ways that help individuals and societies learn how to be good relatives. The recurring premise is that we are all related, not only as humans but also as relatives with the natural world and cosmos. Such awareness focuses humans on the lifelong quest to learn how to be good relatives—how to honor our responsibilities to all our relations in all directions as best we can.
This is our adaptive challenge, especially for those of us raised in societies immersed in reptilian-era, brain-stem thinking. When win-lose responses kick in as the default mode, any notion of being relatives goes out the window. We have our work as a species cut out for us, but it is doable. We have the brain to do it. We have the evolutionary call to do it: our species has been given something unique beneath our skulls. And we have the incentive to do it: the stakes for survival could not be higher, far beyond this person or that group “winning.” We face the adaptive challenge of our species’ lifetime to self-evolve by adopting a philosophy—a new story—that fits our brains.

But first, what is this old story that is holding humanity hostage to behavior patterns—win-lose on a rampage—that our brains have long since surpassed?

"Americans Love a Winner"

When a society becomes stuck on the win-lose story, as the US and much of the world is today, it seems as if we are up against another Goliath. The story has morphed into a worldview that tells us what life is all about. We are here, it says, to win. If we do not win, we lose. If we lose, we suffer, and those we love suffer too. Winning is glorious; losing is shameful. Winning is beautiful; losing is ugly. Winning is gaining power; losing is losing everything. Winning is life; losing is death. Be winners!

Gen. George S. Patton’s life as a military man and his job during World War II caused him to develop a philosophy that pushed win-lose thinking to its logical conclusions. When Gen. Patton addressed the troops of the Third Army on 5 June 1944—the day before D-Day—he tied the love of winners and the hatred of losers to being “American”:

Americans love a winner. Americans will not tolerate a loser. Americans despise cowards. Americans play to win all of the time.... That’s why
Americans have never lost nor will ever lose a war; for the very idea of losing is hateful to an American.  


From Social Darwinism to “Greed Is Good”

The US narrative is as Gen. Patton describes it. From there, it is a short walk to social Darwinism: “survival of the fittest” in a win-lose struggle for land, money, power, and resources. The paradigm predates Darwin. But when Darwin’s theory of evolution through “survival of the fittest” and “natural selection” was published, people readily applied the concept to societies.

The social Darwinism version justifies dividing the world into winners and losers and doing whatever it takes to win. Those with the most money must be society’s best and
brightest. Who does not want to be in that club? So the win-lose story gives its blessing to predatory behaviors—unrestrained greed in business and killing through wars and imposed poverty—as a natural, therefore accepted order. In 1944, White professor of history Richard Hofstadter wrote in *Social Darwinism in American Thought*:

Imperialists, calling upon Darwinism in defense of the subjugation of weaker races, could point to *The Origin of Species*, which had referred in its subtitle to *The Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*. Darwin had been talking about pigeons, but the imperialists saw no reason why his theories should not apply to men ... Had not Darwin himself written complacently in *The Descent of Man* of the likelihood that backward races would disappear before the advance of higher civilizations?9

Many people in the corporate and financial worlds buy into this thinking with no apologies. Who can forget Oliver Stone’s 1987 movie, *Wall Street*, and the famous “greed is good” speech that Wall Street tycoon Gordon Gecko gave to “Teldar Paper” stockholders?

The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed, for lack of a better word, is good. Greed is right, greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit.10

In business, the win-lose model is not about taking care of needs, addressing public concerns, solving real-world challenges, or staying in balance with societies and the natural world. It is not about meeting the responsibilities that come with being relatives to all that is around us and sustains us. It is about a few individuals or groups winning in a “winner take all” world, leaving pain, loss, and dangerous imbalances in their wake.

Few of us would admit to being social Darwinists. And most of us know better than to use win-lose responses with family and friends. We know it would destroy our
relationships. Yet this story functions as the on-the-ground philosophy of life for the modern world, certainly for the US.

**The Drive to “Be Number One”**

One reason that the story is so pervasive is that winning feels great. Who does not love to be the winner? All the fantasies built around being the winner are the story’s selling point. The fantasies are seductive. From our earliest experiences, competition is everything, and winning is the prize. Winning gives us a high, a feel-good moment. In that moment, we prove that we are not a loser.

*Brazil celebrates winning the 2013 FIFA Confederations Cup. Photo by Tânia Rêgo/ABr, 2 July 2013. Licensed under CC BY 3.0 Brazil license.*

Because our brains have so much more to them, though, narrowing our thinking to win-lose patterns is toxic for us, because it throws our brains out of balance. The taste for winning becomes addictive, and we find it hard to switch off the habit. One reason is
that pop culture triggers the win-driven response at every turn and broadcasts fears about being a loser. Win-lose messages dominate in workplaces, religion and politics, universities, and the media as well as in entertainment—sports, videogames, reality TV shows, and nature shows. Win-driven thinking is injected into our psyches by a constant feed. Our sense of ourselves bears the imprint of these messages, even though neither label, winner or loser, captures who we are.

Nonetheless, we have been force-fed this narrative. Schools inculcate both the drive to win and the fear of losing from pre-school through graduate school. At home, the children’s party game of musical chairs picks up the lesson. Who can be the last one to claim a chair? The child emerges the victor who is most ready to push siblings and playmates out of the way. All in good fun, right? The game is good for laughs, but we also learn not to concern ourselves with those left standing—with the fact that our “win” has turned friends and relatives into “losers.”

*Children of Marines and sailors play musical chairs, 5 March 2010. Here, an older boy must make a toddler the loser if he wants to stay in the running to win. Everyone is laughing to see the little guy inevitably "lose." Photo by Lance Cpl. Andrew D. Thorburn. Public domain.*
In his book, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, educator Alfie Kohn cites study after study that shows both how pervasive and how destructive the school-inculcated drive to “Be Number One” is. Pitting children against each other leads them to adopt win-driven values, such as insatiability to win, an obsession with looking good enough, and deception (lying) to prop up an image. These values impair young people’s abilities to practice values of good relationships and pro-social skills of cooperation and honest character. They grow up learning to “look out for Number One,” no matter what the cost to others. Self-centeredness, competing for its own sake, lying or pretending to prop up a winner image, as well as chronic insecurity about not being good enough are story-generated, system-selected behaviors.

Kohn’s book came out in 1986, yet many schools still teach new generations to embrace the win-lose approach. The reason is, again, systemic: schools are dress rehearsals for the life beyond—the business, corporate, professional, and academic race to get ahead. Until we shift away from using the win-lose software in society, schools are unlikely to change. The drive to “Be Number One” remains the lesson that students never forget. In a philosophy class, a junior in college reflected, “I hate it when I feel this way, but I am relieved when one of my classmates fails or gets a bad grade, because I know it will be easier for me to get an A.” She was not born thinking this way.

**For Some to Win, Others Must Lose**

As this student realizes, despite its glory, winning has a nasty side. According to the narrative, for us to win, others must lose. For us to have, others must have not. For us to possess, others must be dispossessed. For us to eat, others must starve. For us to take all, others must be left with nothing. For us to live, others must die. Harm-dependent behavior makes total sense on this model. The storyline requires that we be okay with harming others or having them harmed as the way to for us to advance—to win and keep winning.
Taking the win-lose logic a step further, a society of winners requires that we institutionalize a category of “others” whose losses feed our wins, which the next chapter discusses. Beating others is what “winning” means. The story of winning cannot work without a parallel story about “others” who lose. Winners’ stories flood the media; losers’ stories receive much less press.

Part of the reason is that winning requires that we distance ourselves from those whose losses put us on top. We cannot afford to see them as relatives—as related to us on a balanced, equal, caring basis. In the win-lose setup, the lives of losers must count for less.

**Justifying the Win-Lose Setup: Merit Systems**

Because a social class of losers-to-be is essential to the narrative, the narrative must also make the losses of others seem right and justified. Merit is the stock argument. Those who “win,” according to the Darwinian version, prove their superiority within our species. “I/we deserve to win.” Winning demonstrates the winners’ rights not only to survive but also to continue the behaviors that made them win. Because their ways make them come out on top most of the time, they see themselves and their ways as more valuable to society, which justifies their privilege, superiority, and supremacy. Harming others with impunity becomes not only the formula for success but also the behavior most worthy of praise and rewards. That is why so many US place names honor White supremacists who won by being genocidaires and slavers—Washington, Jefferson, Jackson, Ramsey, Calhoun, Harney—the list is long.

By the same logic, those who “lose” are less worthy. They “deserve” to lose and be forgotten. What happens to them is not a concern. As the Chevron lawyer said, “The plaintiffs are really irrelevant. They always were irrelevant.”

If we take the Darwinian logic a step further, eliminating those who lose improves the species. Their losses prove their unfitness, and so winners do our species a service by weeding them out—“thinning the herd.” Win-driven thinking is righteous about what it does. It leads to the colonizers’ assumption: winners must be the heroes and good guys;
losers, the villains, the bad guys, or simply the expendable ones. The stakes are ultimate: succeed or fail, win or die.

If those who are classed to lose want to become one of the winners, then they must become like the winners. Yet win-driven thinking selects groups to become “others” precisely because this is impossible. People whose skin is dark, for example, can never become White (racism); women can never become men (sexism); buffalo and owls can never become humans (species-ism); and streams and mountains can never become CEOs or lobbyists (objectivism and the notion that everything is a commodity on which humans can set a tradable price).

Schools have taught us to think this way. Students who get A’s are “better than” those who get F’s. Certainly, teachers treat them better. Opportunities open for them. They hang out together. They belong to a group that is better, and we want to belong to that group. Those who get F’s are isolated into remedial or alternative school settings. Once labeled and tracked among the “loser” group, these students face bleak futures. Loser groups do not count. We do not want to have anything to do with them. We speak disparagingly about them, and it is okay to do so. The message? Like individuals, groups can be labeled winners or losers as well. It creates a rigged system in which winning is easier for the privileged group.

Presumably the school system measures abilities and merit alone. However, issues of multiple learning styles and trauma aside, the students most likely to get A’s fit society’s profile of a winner. They match teachers’ and society’s expectations, which are shaped by attitudes about race, class, gender, language, culture, religion, customs, ways of communicating, and nationality. Constructing a class of “others” destined to lose makes it easier for winners to win and not feel bad about those who lost. After all, those who lost are “not one of us.”
Negotiating a Place in the Win-Lose Hierarchy

As in school, constructing society on win-driven thinking creates a hierarchy. How much have we won? Who is higher than whom in power, income, status, knowledge, marriage, or wealth? The hierarchy forms a bottom-heavy triangle. Most of humanity and all of the natural world and Earth occupy the lower “loser-to-be” regions.

"Pyramid of Capitalist System: A 1911 Industrial Worker (IWW newspaper) publication advocating industrial unionism that shows a critique of capitalism." Captions from top down: "Capitalism; We Rule You; We Fool You; We Shoot at You; We Eat for You; We Work for All and We Feed All." Public domain.
If we lack the stomach to commit the big harms that put us on top, then we camp out somewhere in the middle. We find a position that seems manageable, and then we try to hold on to it. We push “others” away with built-in conditioning (racism, sexism, species-ism, and objectivism): we assure ourselves that we are “not them, not one of the losers.” At the same time, we hope someone “better than” us will not knock us down a notch. As always with this narrative, the stakes are high. Having a job means we can pay the bills; losing a job means we could end up hungry and homeless. In this philosophy-constructed environment, we become habitually stressed, territorial, insecure, and afraid.

Wherever we are in the hierarchy, win-lose dramas play out. The work atmosphere gets toxic fast when competition and turf battles intensify. And why wouldn’t they? Our institutions are constructed on giving rewards to a few (the job, the raise, or the promotion) and giving only winners the power to make these calls. The dysfunctional behaviors that follow are system/story-generated.

Personal life is not a safe zone from win-lose thinking either. Any issue can turn into two issues: the issue itself, and who wins the argument. Raising children, for example, can become a battle of wills to win, as can vacations, money management, purchases, and everyday chores. As adults, we have adjusted ourselves to these grim dynamics, but parents suffer as they imagine sending their children out into a “dog eat dog,” win-lose world.

Win-Driven Thinking and Genocide

As grim as this picture is, it does not convey the terrible price that the win-lose story exacts. The child’s game of musical chairs and the school’s lessons in meritocracy pave the way for White supremacy, colonization, imperialism, slavery, oppression, and genocide. In the real world, the win-lose narrative generates ruthless behavior against degraded “others.” Yet the “game” frame makes it okay to inculcate win-driven patterns in young and old and to make the win-lose construct seem objective, innocuous, and innocent.
Video games, for example, condition new generations to think in win-lose dynamics. Winning means beating others, and beating others means erasing them like a cartoon image on a screen. What happens to them is irrelevant. Those who lose just disappear, like the White settlers’ myth of “the vanishing Indian.”

The flood of harms against “others,” then, cannot be attributed to a few “bad apples.” Mass harms are not an exception to the rule. Causing mass harms to others—from the 99 percent all the way to genocide and species extinction—is how winning works. It is the rule.

One of the clearest articulations of this rule and the readiness of win-driven thinking to commit genocide comes from Frank Baum, White, the South Dakotan author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. In 1890, Baum was the editor of the Aberdeen, South Dakota, *Saturday Pioneer*. He wrote a now infamous editorial on 3 January 1891—five days after the massacre at Cankpe Opi Wakpala—Wounded Knee. He called for the “total extirmination” of Native Peoples:

> The Pioneer has before declared that our only safety depends upon the total extirmination of the Indians. Having wronged them for centuries we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth. In this lies future safety for our settlers and the soldiers who are under incompetent commands. Otherwise, we may expect future years to be as full of trouble with the redskins as those have been in the past.
This editorial expressed Baum’s studied opinion of what White US Americans should do to Native Peoples. Genocide was his “final solution”—the term Hitler used to justify the Jewish Holocaust—to what Whites called the “Indian problem.” It never occurred to Baum that Whites and how we think are the problem. On 20 December 1890, nine days before the Wounded Knee massacre, Baum wrote another editorial reflecting on the assassination of Tatanka Iyotake, also known as Sitting Bull, Hunkpapa Titunwan, leader and holy man:

The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent, and the best safety of the frontier settlements will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians. Why not annihilation? Their glory has fled, their spirit broken, their manhood effaced; better that they die than live the miserable wretches that they are. 

We would like to think that Whites no longer write racist editorials calling to exterminate Native peoples. But in the mid-to-late 1990s, anonymous South Dakotans
distributed on Oceti Sakowin Oyate homelands an equally racist, vicious flyer, printed on South Dakota’s official state letterhead, declaring open hunting season on Native people: “This year from 1999–2000 will be an open season, as the f--- Indians must be thinned out every two to three years … Remember limit is ten (10) per day.” The flyer lays out murderous, dehumanizing, genocidal regulations, for example: “It will be unlawful to possess a road-kill Indian, however, special road-kill permits shall be issued to people with semi-tractor trailers and one-ton pickup trucks.”

Whites have targeted many Peoples of Color with similar messages. In the South, Whites distributed "N----- Hunting Licenses" at all-White gatherings, such as the "Good Ol' Boys Roundup." Federal agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms in southern Tennessee ran these gatherings from 1980–1996. "Jap Hunting Licenses" appeared in the 1990s as well. And in 2007, after being beaten by Orange County patrol officers for no reason, a Latino motorist heard an officer murmur, "We love hunting wetbacks."
“In October 2014, photos of a ‘nigger hunting’ license circulated on social media sites, often accompanied by a message claiming the license had been issued by the state of Missouri. However, the pictured license was not issued by the state of Missouri, nor did it provide the holder the legal right to hunt and kill African-Americans. It was a real piece of racist memorabilia said to date from the 1920s (but actually artificially aged), one which was reportedly sold at an annual party thrown by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) called ‘The Good Ol’ Boys Roundup’ in 1995.” From: “Does This Photograph Show a Missouri ‘Nigger Hunting’ License? Extant pieces of racist memorabilia serve as reminders of 20th century American racial attitudes.” https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/missouri-licenses/
The Sicangu Sun Times, 1–15 October 1999, reprinted the racist, genocidal flyer declaring "open season" on murdering Native people living in South Dakota. The flyer is reproduced in Dean Chavers, Racism in Indian Country (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009), 69. The text of the flyer was also placed in the US Senate Congressional Record, 28 October 1999, by Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell to show the "racism against American Indians." The flyer is a call to genocide.
In all these cases, no Whites were ever charged. Though South Dakota issued an official denial of responsibility, no one in South Dakota’s state government apologized to the Dakota and Titunwan Peoples. The state offered no assurances to guarantee their safety or saw fit to pursue the perpetrator(s) with a criminal investigation for inciting racial hate crimes and genocide.

Okay, so this is South Dakota, the "Mississippi of the North" for Native Peoples. But what about the US’s response to the Seventh Cavalry’s massacre of an estimated 300 Titunwan civilians—women, children, and families—at Cankpe Opi Wakpala, Wounded Knee? The US has yet to offer an official apology to the Oceti Sakowin Oyate for the massacre. No compensation for this premeditated massacre of civilians—a crime against humanity—has been made to the Oyate (the Lakota People and Nation) or to the descendants of those who were mass murdered. Had these 300 Titunwan people lived, their descendants today—seven generations later—could easily number in the thousands. With them went cultural knowledge and history, language and kinship bonds, as well as their ongoing, multi-generational stake in the Oceti Sakowin Oyate’s title to their ancestral, treaty-guaranteed lands.

Instead, the US Army awarded Medals of Honor, its highest award, to twenty of the Seventh Cavalry’s soldiers for murdering hundreds of unarmed Titunwan civilians.\textsuperscript{16} These Medals of Honor have never been rescinded. The crime against humanity that White American soldiers perpetrated at Cankpe Opi Wakpala remains officially celebrated and honored by the United States.
Rifles and rapid-fire Hotchkiss guns are not the only way for a state and people—the winners—to perpetrate genocide. Poverty works just as well, and forcing poverty is one of colonization’s oldest strategies. The US has used starvation repeatedly to try to force Native nations to sign treaties, agreements, and contracts that have been unjust, deceptive, and against their interests. After centuries of being under attack from White US Americans, many Native people are in survival mode most of the time.

Native reservations now face an average of 49 percent unemployment. The Bureau of Indian Affair’s (BIA’s) 2005 report on unemployment among Native Peoples placed South Dakota at the top: 83 percent of Native people living in South Dakota have no job. Of those employed, 65 percent are paid so little that they live below the poverty line. By contrast, South Dakota’s average [White] unemployment rate for 2005 was 3.7 percent.

In September 2010, Amy Goodman, White US American journalist and host of Democracy Now!, asked Henry Red Cloud, Oglala Titunwan, about the 2010 recession and how the 10 percent national unemployment rate was affecting his nation. He responded that his homeland on Pine Ridge in South Dakota, where 44,000 Oglala Titunwan people live, had an 86 percent rate of unemployment. He elaborated,
So, if there’s a day that we have … ten percent unemployment, people would be having a powwow and singing and dancing in the streets. It has had effect out there. You know, Native people are in survival mode every day. The average Lakota, where I come from, lives on $6,100 per year, which isn’t much. So, everybody is in survival mode, doing what they can and living with the land—not on the land, but living with the land.¹⁹

"Henry Red Cloud from Lakota Solar Enterprises on Pine Ridge Reservation ... started his own renewable energy business on Pine Ridge Reservation. He creates jobs, local economic development and helps hundreds of families every year harness the power of the sun to stay warm during the winter." Photo by Alexis Bonogofsky, 21 June 2014.

The poverty Native Peoples suffer today is not their cultural heritage or norm. Before Whites invaded, Native Peoples and nations enjoyed food security, sovereignty, cultural wealth, and vast territories for millennia. But Native Peoples have been targeted
for taking since 1492, and European and White colonizers have used poverty against them as a constant weapon.

Poverty on Native homelands continues to pay off for Whites. It renders communities vulnerable to corporations that seek minerals, oil, or water lying within their borders. The stories of how Whites have stolen from, polluted the lands of, and exploited Native Peoples do not quit. Whether something is legal or not is irrelevant. Whites make the laws. Even then, if a law conflicts with a desired “win,” either we find a way around the law or we ignore it, confident that we will not be prosecuted or that penalties will be minimal. The ongoing success of the setup hinges, though, on keeping Native Peoples dirt poor.

Many Indigenous homelands have been rendered dangerously radioactive due to mining operations, including long abandoned uranium mines. Defenders of the Black Hills, led by Charmaine White Face, Oglalla Titunwan, tests the radioactivity in many sites across Oceti Sakowin homelands and pushes for abandoned mines to be cleaned up. Cancer rates among the Titunwan are among the highest in the US. Here, Jill Stein, White US Green Party presidential candidate (2012 and 2016), stands in solidarity with Charmaine White Face. Photo Courtesy of Clean Up the Mines. Used with the permission of Charmaine White Face.
Indigenous Peoples are not the only group to be targeted for genocide, brutality, and intergenerational poverty, of course. The holocaust that Whites have perpetrated against Africans and African Americans is every bit as genocidal and ongoing.

One practice among untold crimes against Black humanity illustrates where winner-loser thinking has taken us. Seeking prized alligator skins, White hunters in Florida and bayou states kidnapped Black babies, tied them up, and used them as bait. Sometimes the hunters shot the alligators before they reached the babies; sometimes the alligators ate the babies whole, and the hunters dragged them in on the line tied to the babies. Evidence for this practice comes from three movies ("Alligator Bait" (1900), "The ‘Gator and the Pickaninny" (1900), and "Untamed Fury” (1947)), newspaper articles (e.g., Time Magazine, 1923), postcards, advertisements (e.g., for licorice candies), and oral histories from Whites whose ancestors did this and Blacks whose ancestors were targeted. The Black grandparents tended not to speak of this though, not only because it was so horrific and painful, but also because, as one grandmother said, she did not want her children to grow up hating Whites.

How often Black babies were used as bait for alligators and how many babies were kidnapped and murdered are not known. However, even if this never happened (and many believe it did), the concept clearly captivated Whites, who used many cultural references to the practice to dehumanize African Americans, terrorize them, and reinforce their role as losers. The White women and men who purchased alligator handbags, shoes, and belts were complicit in perpetuating either the actions or the genocidal image, since the image was widespread in White society. For sure, "alligator bait" was more than a slang term that Whites used for Blacks from the 1860s through the 1960s.21

When we choose to put the full powers of the human brain in the service of reptilian-era thinking and iterate this choice across society, our capacities to commit atrocities evidently know no limits. Here again, no White was ever charged with the
kidnapping, attempted murder, and murder of these Black babies. The choice to use our brains this way has gone unchallenged.

Whites no longer use Black children to bait alligators, but Whites continue to view Black lives as expendable. Otherwise, the Black Lives Matter movement would have no reason to exist, and Black people would not be arrested, incarcerated, and killed by police so disproportionately to Whites.

Many Black families and communities still serve as bait, though, for Whites' profit schemes. Consider just one. Reporting on a US Department of Justice investigation, for example, The Atlantic summarized: "Ferguson [Missouri] officials [police and courts] leched off the black community as shamelessly as would mafia bosses." The "justice" officials' scheme stole revenue from the Black community through racially targeted ticketing, arrests, fees, bail, fines, and jail sentences in total violation of Black citizens' civil rights. No White would ever be treated these ways. Ferguson's criminal legal system tore Black families apart and drove them into debt and despair.

Forcing poverty and indebtedness through any number of schemes is winner/colonizer behavior 101. Winners figure out ways first to steal what is most
valuable to people—land, labor, freedom, and natural wealth—and then to make those targeted indebted out the other side. Once robbed and oppressed, people lack the means to support themselves. As long as the scheme goes unchallenged, their indebtedness is inescapable and permanent.

Such practices are not peripheral to a basically good system; they are how a win-lose system operates. Toward the end of the documentary The End of Poverty? directed by Philippe Diaz, the narrator summarizes: "Our chosen economic system always was and still is financed by the poor." According to win-driven thinking, the role of “losers” is to fund “winners”—against their will, usually at gunpoint, and under the threat of annihilation. They pay the price for winners to “win.”

Activist filmmaker and director Philippe Diaz filming The End of Poverty in Sucre, Bolivia. Photo by Beth Portello. Courtesy of Cinema Libre Studio.
The Win-Lose Story Does Not Work Well for Our Species

Again, I do not cite race-based harms—atrocities—to show Whites only at our worst or to claim that we are terrible people. The issue is the narrative we choose to iterate. If we iterate win-lose thinking, this is where we end up.

Win-lose behaviors work for other species at other stages of evolution. Reptiles and mammals do not go crazy in a quest to win. They do not throw their worlds out of balance as they go about meeting daily needs. Most other predators are not intra-species predators. Even if they fight over territory, they do not prey on their own kind. Most other predators also have an “Off” switch. They kill to eat, and then they stop. Top predators like big cats, bears, eagles, orcas, and wolves spend the majority of their time resting, playing, or engaging in pro-social behaviors with their family and group. Even alligators eat their fill and then sleep.

Humans in predator mode operate differently. Other humans, all species, the Earth, the entire natural world, as well as other planets and the cosmos are potential prey. Worse, only humans predate without limit, both in what we will destroy and in nonstop predation. For humans, winning becomes an addiction: we act without empathy or conscience, and we do not know when to quit. One cruel word, act, or weapon sets a new high-bar for the next to surpass. We have no treatment centers for this. Quite the opposite, our entire society triggers the addiction to winning and being No. 1.

If we recognize this vulnerability in our species, then we can get on with our species’ task of breaking the habit and stepping into our powers to be more—full-brained humans. This is our adaptive challenge: to use our brains’ powers more fully and in balance. In the present evolutionary age, we can leave win-lose skills to Earth’s reptiles and to playing mutually consensual, power-balanced, refereed games. We can learn from mammals about bonding, being relatives, and nurturing each other. We can then focus on developing our powers to be good relatives to all our relations by acting mindfully, compassionately, ethically, and intelligently—by acting with reason, empathy, and
conscience—our “Good Mind.” For this, we need to set our brains on distinctly human mode.

There is a way back from where win-lose thinking takes us, and, once again, being human is how.

**Notes**


6. For a simple explanation of the parts of the brain, see General Psychology, “What Are the Parts of the Brain and Their Functions?”

7. Wikipedia, “George S. Patton’s Speech to the Third Army.”

8. Social Darwinism has a complex history in terms of advocates and critics. Many books address this core controversy in Western thought and the directions people have gone with it. Wikipedia’s online summary of “Social Darwinism” is well worth reading.


11. See Kohn, No Contest. His website gives a summary of the book: "No Contest, which has been stirring up controversy since its publication in 1986, stands as the definitive critique of competition. Drawing from hundreds of studies, Alfie
Kohn eloquently argues that our struggle to defeat each other—at work, at school, at play, and at home—turns all of us into losers.

“Contrary to the myths with which we have been raised, Kohn shows that competition is not an inevitable part of ‘human nature.’ It does not motivate us to do our best (in fact, the reason our workplaces and schools are in trouble is that they value competitiveness instead of excellence). Rather than building character, competition sabotages self-esteem and ruins relationships. It even warps recreation by turning the playing field into a battlefield.

“No Contest makes a powerful case that ‘healthy competition’ is a contradiction in terms. Because any win/lose arrangement is undesirable, we will have to restructure our institutions for the benefit of ourselves, our children, and our society. For this [1992] revised edition, Kohn adds a comprehensive account of how students can learn more effectively by working cooperatively in the classroom instead of struggling to be Number One. He also offers a pointed and personal afterword, assessing shifts in American thinking on competition and describing reactions to his provocative message.”


12. Baum,”The Wounded Knee Editorial (1891).” This editorial is now in the public domain and can be found in many books as well as on the web. One source is Wikisource.

13. Baum, “The Sitting Bull Editorial (1890).” Baum carries on in this vein and worse. This editorial, like the one on Wounded Knee, is now in the public domain and can be found in many books as well as on the web. One source is Wikisource.

14. “Proclamation RE: Indian Hunting Season Hunting Fees.”


16. See Gonzalez and Cook-Lynn, Politics of Hallowed Ground, 392n21, for a list of the eighteen individuals awarded a Medal of Honor for the 1890 Wounded Knee Massacre.


20. O’Harrow, Jr., describes one of the latest schemes to make astronomical wins on Native people and at their expense in his article, “In Deals between Alaska Corporation and D.C. Area Contractor, a Disconnect.”

