Harm-Dependent No More:
Who Are We—Winners and Losers or Relatives?
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Introduction: Protocols for Dialogue and Reasons for Hope

Four Indigenous Protocols for Dialogue

Addressing harms and our role in them across generations elicits deep and often painful feelings. It involves questioning who we are, personally and as a people. The conversation can be difficult on all sides. To set a good tone, I appeal to four Indigenous protocols for dialogue. In doing so, I am not trying to “go Native.” I call on these protocols as load-bearing beams for the work ahead of us. Indigenous cultures embody millennia of learning from experiences and model what it takes to survive, coexist, and thrive over generations. They put into practice worldviews that begin with a core truth: our relatedness makes our existence possible. These four protocols, as far as I understand them, encourage humans to act mindful of how related we are.

My goal in learning from Indigenous cultural ways is neither for us to become better colonizers nor for Whites to become Indigenous to this land, which we cannot. Our Indigenous roots lie elsewhere. Instead, my hope is that we as a people can move toward other ways of being. Cultural transference for transformation is different from cultural appropriation for colonization—control and domination. Cultural appropriation means exploiting another culture to gain something not due or to exercise a power advantage. It reenacts colonizer violence: those with power and privilege steal what belongs to others and use it for their one-sided benefit. Cultural transference aims to stop this violence and to undo the setup that perpetrates it. The goal is that the lives of people from both cultures benefit from the exchange.

By citing these Indigenous protocols, then, I hope to engage in cultural transference: learning from other cultures. The world of colonization is the world I have known. Its ways are adversarial, competitive, win-driven, and harm-based. To change these habits, I need to learn from cultures steeped and vested not in colonizing but in sustaining good relations—peoples steeped in different ways of being together.
1. Acknowledging and Honoring the Original People of the Land

In the preface (“From Win-Lose Thinking to Being Good Relatives”), I engaged the first protocol, which is to acknowledge and honor the First People whose homeland I am on—the Elders, ancestors, families, and communities. Whether people come to this land by honorable means or not, Minnesota will always be the ancestral homeland of the Dakota Oyate (People or Nation), and it is right to acknowledge them as the Original People of this place on Earth. It reminds us that, beyond colonization’s multi-century drama of conquest, land theft, occupation, genocide, and oppression, we who visit or live here are the guests of Indigenous Peoples.

Wanda McCaslin, Métis, was the first to explain this protocol to me. The issue is not where one goes on Earth, she said, but how one goes there. Whenever one is invited to speak in a place that is not the home of one’s deep ancestors, it is important to acknowledge the Original People of that land. Beginning this way expresses respect for those who have been in relation with that particular place since time immemorial. Many Indigenous Peoples, she explained, practice similar protocols of respect when their citizens enter another’s homeland.

Honoring the ancestors of a place is, indeed, a worldwide Indigenous practice. The protocol preserves positive inter-nation, inter-peoples relations. It also names the distinct relation Indigenous Peoples have with Mother Earth, whom they experience as a relative. Their relationship is different from purchasing "property" or even living in a place or country for many generations. Indigenous stewardship involves being in a reciprocal relationship with the land and practicing responsibilities from both sides: not only the land to the people but also the people to the land. Malls, parking lots, corporate complexes, and multiplex theaters convey a different mindset and do not practice mutual care and accountability.
In Australia, for example, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people engage two ceremonies, if they desire, that reflects their differing relationships with the land: Welcome to Country and Acknowledgement of Country. The two ceremonies now form a regular part of Australian political process. As a peoples-to-peoples, nation-to-nation practice, everyone shows respect by doing it. The Koori Mail: The Voice of Indigenous Australia explains:

“Welcomes [to country] … are what traditional owners give—if they so desire. There should be no expectation or demand for this to be the case.”

An “Acknowledgement of Country” is a way that all people can show respect for Aboriginal culture and heritage and the ongoing relationship the traditional owners have with their land. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can perform “Acknowledgement of Country.” It is a demonstration of respect dedicated to the traditional custodians of the land (or sea) where the event, meeting, school function, or conference takes place.

“Acknowledgements of country and traditional owners are something that decent non-Indigenous people give, not because they feel pushed into it, but because they believe it is the right thing to do.”

Treaties between the US and Native nations recognize the Indigenous owners of the land in an official, governmental, and politically binding way. They are another expression of this protocol. In the US Constitution, treaties are “the supreme law of the land.” The supreme status of treaties underscores how important this first protocol is to international law and peaceful relations.
If we choose to practice respectful coexistence with Native Nations, this protocol is a place to start. Imagine how consciousness would shift if every person speaking in public—and certainly every public servant from the US president on down—opened every speech with acknowledging the First People of the land where he or she stood.

2. Bringing Values of Being Related to the Dialogue

The second protocol invites us to consider the values we bring to the dialogue. This is another core teaching of Indigenous cultures: remembering our values helps us come together "in a good way.” Indigenous greetings often model the choice to bring the values of being good relatives to the exchange: acknowledging each other as relatives and showing civility, respect, and generosity. When Dakota people rise to speak at a gathering, for example, they often say,

\textit{Mitakuyepi, owasin iyuskinyan, cante wasteya nape ciyuzapi ye.}

It means, “My relatives, all. I am happy to be here with you. I shake your hand with good feelings in my heart.” Dr. Clifford Canku, Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota, author and professor of Dakota language, philosophy, and culture, shared this Dakota greeting and its translation.

\textbf{Dr. Clifford Canku, Sisseton Wahpeton Dakota, Professor of Dakota Studies, pictured here teaching graduate students Dakota language as well as engaging them in his research on the concentration camp for Dakota political prisoners of war in Davenport, Iowa. Photo by Dan Koeck / North Dakota State University, 7 February 2011. Used with permission from Dr. Canku.}
Treating each other as relatives puts us in a good frame of mind. It aligns us with the truth that we are, in fact, relatives far beyond what we customarily perceive ourselves to be. We do not treat relatives as expendable. We need our relatives; they help us, and we help them.

The greeting also resonates with what I have learned in restorative practices, which have their origins in Indigenous philosophies and ways. The idea is that it is good to begin an in-depth or difficult conversation with sharing our values. The values expressed in the greeting are basic: we are relatives, and we are happy to come together as such; we treat each other as fellow human beings first; we show respect by shaking hands; and we hold good feelings in our hearts as we engage our time together.

Sometimes, this is not easy to do. Practicing it takes commitment—“daily diligent discipline.” One mother’s experience illustrates. In 1973, Marietta Jaeger-Lane’s seven-year-old daughter was kidnapped, raped, and murdered on the first night of a family vacation. A White mother of five children, Marietta used these words to describe her resolve to maintain a best-values attitude toward the person—a young White man—who did this to her youngest daughter. Hers was a long and painful journey, but she threw the weight of her soul behind bringing her best values to her thoughts about him. “I hope he is having a good day, because if my daughter is still alive, he is more likely to be good to her. And if he has killed her, he may be less likely to do the same to someone else’s child.”
So, when the man called Marietta unexpectedly, she responded with values he did not expect. Because other children had disappeared, Marietta was determined to stop the kidnappings. “Daily diligent discipline” is how she describes her commitment to bringing her best values to this horrific experience. Her determination not to exclude him not only gave her peace personally but also enabled her to play a major role in stopping the murders—in tracking him so that he could be arrested, stopped, and charged.

Nothing was easy for her about this. Her inner work was not an escape or a superficial “feel good.” She did not deny the crime, minimize its horrors, or blunt her demand for justice. Rather, her inner discipline enabled her to do the job that fate and justice had given her. She did say, though, that practicing values of being related is “not for wimps.”

Values channel our mind’s energies. When we consider engaging something important, it helps to name the values we hold that will channel our mutual energies well and reliably. Practicing respect does not fail us, nor does holding to compassion, patience, honesty, or speaking from the heart.
3. Remembering and Honoring All Our Relations

The third Indigenous protocol reminds us, once again, that our existence depends on being related to all that is in the best way we can. This protocol is essential to this book’s argument—another load-bearing beam—because it asserts a worldview that is truer to our reality than the win-lose narrative. It remembers and names all our relations and honors their contribution to our existence.

The Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address, which is given when people gather for important dialogue, models the third protocol. Whatever we choose to do affects many others, not only humans but also Earth and all beings of the natural world—and not only in the now but in choosing timelines and which futures come to be. Yet we slip into making decisions in narrow frames. The third protocol protects humans from this narrowness by naming all the beings of the universe who are part of our world, who are relatives to us, and who feel the impact of our actions. The third protocol frames our decisions with "all our relations" in mind.

The Thanksgiving Address, the "Words That Come Before All Else." This is "a poster of the Thanksgiving Address, the basis of the spiritual beliefs of the Six Nation people, written in Cayuga in the Six Nations Reserve 31 January 2008." Picture taken 31 January 2008. CANADA-CAYUGA/ REUTERS/Julie Gordon.
The late great scholar, historian, activist, peacemaker, and author Sotsisowah, Dr. John Mohawk, Seneca, explained the value of opening a gathering this way:

The Iroquois culture has a tradition that every time we gather together to have a meeting, we open with what is called a ga no ya or opening speech. Some people call it a thanksgiving address. That talk is whatever everyone who is sane in the world should agree on. It’s kind of like Iroquois diplomacy: we start with what we agree on and then we keep going to the things that we cannot agree on.

So what is it that we all agree on? The speech starts with an opening that we see one another; we need each other; we need people to be in the world, and it’s a good thing that there are people in the world; we’re grateful and thankful that there are other people in the world and it’s good to see them here, so we give a greeting.

We acknowledge others in our greetings and thanksgiving and we greet one another with this in mind. Since that’s how we do things amongst ourselves, we should be able to do that with other beings, and so it goes on and we do greetings to the earth. Everybody should be able to give greetings to the Mother Earth. She’s a person, and—call it poetic—it’s a way of us having a relationship with that, so we acknowledge that relationship, it’s fundamental.

Right after people, earth. Then it goes to grasses, waters, trees, plants, winds, the moon, the stars, the sun, the universe, the whole thing. Everybody in the world ought to be able to agree that we depend on those things. Those things are actually essential to us, and that’s the rational mind, with a poetic way of expressing a rational mind. Some people look at that and say that’s spiritual. Whatever you call it is fine. It’s us expressing our positive relationship to all the others, every other that we can think of. We have not separated ourselves from them. They are others and we are part of the others.

We do this speech at the beginning and the end of every meeting because people need to be reminded of that. It’s a constant reminder.\(^1\)
Sakokweniónkwas, Tom Porter, leader with his people and Bear Clan Elder of the Mohawk Nation, explains more about this greeting:

Some people call it the Thanksgiving Address. Others call it the Greetings. But in my language, Mohawk, this is what we call it—Ohén:ton Karihwatéhkwen. A more literal translation would be what we say before we do anything important.\(^5\)
The greeting is, as Prof. Mohawk explained, a reminder of what holds humans in a good way with all those who make our existence possible. It names what we have in common—relationships essential to our mutual life on Earth. The greeting is like a prayer, “We are all related. Please help us be good relatives through what we are going to say and do together.”

4. Being Grateful and Keeping an Open and Humble Mind

The fourth protocol sets an intention to internalize what it means to be good relatives: we call on gratitude, openness, and humility to frame our mindset and approach. For example, it is good to feel heartfelt appreciation for those who are willing to engage a difficult conversation with us. Feeling grateful acknowledges the value of others’ experiences and their time and effort in sharing them. Gratitude also reminds us how many others have given us life, taught us, and helped us along the way.

By setting aside filters and listening from the heart, an open mindset enables us to expand our awareness. Humility helps us do this by reminding us that what we do not know exceeds what we know. The Greek philosopher Plato (circa 428–347 BCE) famously quoted Socrates (470–399 BCE), his teacher: “The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing,” and that “to fancy that we know what we do not know” is unwise and dangerous.
Practicing these qualities calls for mindfulness as well. Scientists now believe that our brains give us vast capacities for learning and that we possess these abilities throughout our lives. Being grateful, open, and humble help us access these powers and put them to use.

Getting Our Bearings

Stepping Up to Our Global and Species’ Crisis

One thing for sure, we are in an “All hands on deck” global and species crisis. We have come to a fork in the road. Only the diverse wisdom and experiences of all of us can choose the best path forward. Our hope lies, I believe, with changing our approach, our “software”—how we think—so that we can change our course. Each of us holds a piece of this puzzle and a role in the shift under way.

My hope is to join a dialogue that has been going on for a very long time. People like me—White US Americans—have often assumed we did not need to think about colonization, oppression, and the racism that serves us. Many of us are realizing how much we do. Not only is it wrong to allow injustices to stand among us, but also our own interests are at stake. What we as a people have done to “others” is now playing out in our own families and communities. Think of climate breakdown, financial losses, toxins in food, loss of privacy, crushing education debts, war debts, rising addictions, or diminished health and healthcare. Sooner or later, a win-lose, harm-dependent habit comes around to bite us, because it creates an insatiably predatory world—one in which no one is safe.

What Is Negative, and What Is Positive?

For some, addressing the harms of win-lose thinking may seem like focusing on “a lot of negative stuff.” This perception raises several issues.

First, what is truly positive or working well does not need our critical attention as much as what is in crisis and causing suffering. What is threatening us now and what has made life hell for so many: these things need our time and best thinking. For an analogy, if we carry toxins that are making us sick, focusing only on our healthy cells will not alone get us better. If we are carrying toxins, our healthy cells are at risk, and they may not be as healthy as we think. We need to find healthy patterns, which means we need to address what is making us toxic. Doctors mend bodies by going to where it hurts and where pain has resided the longest.
Second, yes, learning about harms and engaging their repair are painful. “I am too sensitive. I cannot hear these things. I get too depressed”: when these feelings come up for me, as they do, I take a break. The race-based messaging that pervades White society is hard enough to identify and offset in oneself, but burnout and overwhelm can feed a reaction to pull away too. With perspective and a breather, I can then come back.

What also keeps me in the game is remembering those on the planet, who number in the vast majority, who do not have the privilege of stepping back. They are sensitive people as well. They get depressed too. But they cannot walk away from what has happened to them and their relatives, from the poverty that cuts off their options, from the poisons killing their once pristine neighborhoods and homelands, or from the racism and injustices they face every day. Plus, in an interrelated universe, the presumed privilege of ignoring harms to anyone anywhere is a delusion—one for which our descendants will pay.

Third, “the only way out is through.” Going straight into the fire of what causes harm in the world changes us in the ways we need most. We learn about realities that we have pushed to the margins, and this awareness equips us to choose better. Confronting habits of harm-dependence builds our integrity as peoples, and it makes society stronger too. We learn how to act with integrity precisely by honoring our responsibilities—holding ourselves accountable and repairing harms we have caused others on our way to the good life. Repairing harms teaches us how to build a society that is safer, more inclusive, just, and compassionate, hence more prosperous for everyone.

Yet both colonizer and colonized, oppressor and oppressed, each for our own reasons, can pull back from confronting harms. One White reader, a dear friend, commented about 300 pages into the manuscript, “Is this whole book negative?” I understand her response, and I took it to heart. Her reaction raises a fourth issue: What is negative, and what is positive?

Catastrophic harms—mass crimes against humanity—are embedded in our history. They lie at the foundations of US wealth and society. They and all that causes them count as negative.

The next question is, given mass harms, what is a negative response to them and what is a positive response? Not confronting harms is negative, because it keeps harm-dependent patterns going. The mindset of profiting by doing harm is still at large. Denial protects harm-dependent behavior. If I, my family and relatives, my ancestors, and those like me had suffered life-damaging, often catastrophic harms over generations, I would experience a social blackout on talking about these harms, much less on repairing them, as negative. Things will not change or be put right as long as we refuse to discuss hard truths.
By contrast, if my people had suffered unacknowledged and unrepaired harms across generations, I would experience efforts to address the harms and mend them as positive. Naming harms and what is generating them is positive, because it is the first step toward putting things right and, again, toward building a more just, hence sustainable future for all of us.

Consider an analogy. Our house is on fire: that is negative. The house is on fire because we have a habit of lighting matches and dropping them around the house: that is negative too. Acting as if our house is not burning and as if dropping lit matches is okay is also negative. But sounding the alarm, even though it points to negative outcomes from negative behaviors, is positive. We can take steps to avoid certain death, we can change habits that need to change, and maybe we can put out the fire and repair its damage, so we can live in the house safely and happily.

This book's goal is to interrupt harm-dependent patterns, and ignoring harms is a major pattern we need to interrupt. I cite so many harms to demonstrate how very harm-dependent a win-lose way of life actually is and has been for centuries. My goal is to work toward not only mending harms but also changing the framework that causes them. This, to my mind, is positive—the most positive thing we can do.

**Terminology: “Whites” and "American"**

Some thoughts about language use. Language distorts and is inadequate. We do the best we can. Our choices about language reflect our values and priorities as we communicate. They are also context specific: we use language in specific contexts for specific purposes. In other contexts, we might choose differently. So I want to share my thinking about how I use some critical terms in this book, given its purpose.

I capitalize terms for peoples that function as names: “Natives,” “Blacks,” “Whites,” “Dakota,” or “Latinxs.” It seems respectful to do so. I also follow the “Convention Style Sheet for Native Subject-Matters” developed by Living Justice Press’s Senior Editor for Native Studies, Dr. Edward C. Valandra, Sicangu Titunwan.

In line with these conventions, I name the ethnicity or nationality of those whom I cite, including those of us of European descent. Experience matters, and ethnicity and nationality shape our experiences.

I use “Whites” as shorthand for “White US Americans.” Sometimes those of us who are White bristle at being called White, even though the term is commonly used in
mainstream/Whitestream media. "White" names our role in the racial hierarchy of power and privilege in US society. Whiteness has also functioned as the invisible norm—the unspoken default. Silence around “White” keeps the elephant in the room of White supremacist histories and institutions off-limits for discussion. As long as the race-based nature of harms is not named, the racial injustices built into our systems will persist. The social constructs of race, racism, and White supremacy are, of course, integral to colonization and other systems for profiting from doing harm to targeted groups. Simply naming Whites is a first step toward unsettling the setup.

Some people prefer—and for many good reasons—other terms for Whites: Anglos, Caucasians, Euro-Americans, and Euro-Canadians. These terms shift the identification away from skin color and the social constructs around race and toward culture, ethnicity, and geographic ancestries. Does using the term "White" perpetuate racist categories through language use? Does it reinforce notions of racial purity? Does it reinforce a focus on skin color? These are important questions.

Others in decolonizing work rightly encourage “Whites” to name our ethnicities. Our ancestors belonged to European Peoples: the Irish, the Swedes, the Celts, the Norwegians, the Germans, the French, the Dutch, the English, the Spanish, the Lithuanians, and so on. “‘White’ has no homeland,” the late David E. Larsen, Mdewakanton Dakota elder, historian, leader, and educator, says, “‘White’ is not a people.” White has no country; it is a social construct designed to exploit racial “Others.” Rather than buying into this construct, we need to know who we are—our people, where we came from, and where our ancestral homelands lie.

I value these views. They speak important truths about the struggle to end racism. One day, “White” will become irrelevant, obsolete. But because we are not there yet—because so much justice work stands between here and there—“White” is the term I have chosen to use. We all know to whom it refers. There is also a practical reason. Since being White has functioned as an unspoken default among Whites, when I try to describe someone I am quoting, I can barely confirm that an individual is White, much less which country/countries in Europe their ancestors came from.

But most of all, first used in the 1600s, the term ‘White’ has a history in North America. “White” came into use with the racialization of two peoples-to-peoples relations: first, European colonizers with Native nations to rationalize land theft, ethnic cleansing, and genocide; and second, European slave traders and slave masters with African and Native peoples to rationalize the slave trade. For talking about colonization and its legacy in North America, “White” links the people with the history. The other terms do not. The Celts as a
people, for example, did not commit genocide or enslave peoples in North America; Whites have done this. Until we address the history and its ongoing realities today—until a Black person is not killed by security forces almost every day, until treaties with Native nations are honored, until peoples of color are not dehumanized and oppressed economically, socially, educationally, and politically, until historical harms are rectified, repaired, and cease to damage new generations with institutionalized inequities—“White” is the most relevant term. Whites, not Peoples of Color, have made it so.
Another language use that warrants critical attention is the use of "American." Certainly, equating "American" with "White" is a racist usage, because it treats Whites as the default standard for being an American—the unstated norm against which everyone is measured and People of Color fall short. The usage denies the full citizen rights of Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, Jewish Americans, Muslim Americans and all the diverse ethnicities and peoples who are equally US citizens. The stance of White supremacy is that the only "real Americans" are White. Naming the race, culture, or nationality of an "American" offsets the White supremacist usage.

"American" raises international concerns as well. The Western hemisphere is the Americas, including North, Central, and South Americas. Everyone on this hemisphere can rightly refer to themselves as American, as much as those of us in the US can. It is neither geographically accurate nor respectful of the existence of all the nations and peoples on this hemisphere to appropriate the term "American" exclusively for US citizens. We are American, but not because of US citizenship; we live in the Americas. To reflect this awareness, I use "US American"—White US American or Black US American. There may be less cumbersome ways to address the issue, but for now and in a book about addressing harms between peoples, it makes sense to use language that helps us develop a more balanced, respectful, and inclusive perspective.

**Four Sources of Hope**

Longstanding crimes against humanity that continue unrepaired, crises in every direction: where might we find hope? Four sources of hope suggest that positive change is afoot and that each of us has a role in making it happen.
1. The Growing Voice, Power, and Activism of Peoples of Color

“If you want to know if you are going the right way, follow women of color, sisters and brothers. We know where we need to go, and we know where justice is, because when we fight for justice, we fight for it for all people, for all our communities.” Linda Sarsour, Muslim Palestinian-American, spoke these words at the Women’s March, which she co-organized, on 21 January 2017, the day after Pres. Trump’s inauguration.

The 45th US administration is not the first time winning for Whites—“Make America Great Again”—has rallied White voters. For centuries in North America, win-lose thinking has perpetrated mass harms along so-called racial lines—"so-called" because race is a social construct, not a biological reality. So where is the hope?

The hope comes precisely from those harmed: when they rise up and say "No!", they claim their power beyond the win-lose system. By rejecting the role of loser, they reject the win-lose model. People of Color testify to the real costs of win-driven behavior. Colonization, genocide, slavery, Jim Crow, racism, forced poverty: these acts, each inflicting catastrophic harms, are not marginal to US history. They are the central acts that Whites have committed to build US wealth on the wholesale losses and suffering of Peoples of Color—and to keep that wealth since 1492.

To get off this win-lose track, we need the knowledge and wisdom of all peoples. Right now, those we have heard from the least are those we need to hear from most. Theirs is the missing input. Their experiences tell the full character of the win-lose setup, not just the winner’s side. Win-lose thinking broadcasts the benefits but hides the costs. The lure of winning draws us in. Those who pay are less deceived; their multigenerational experience
testifies to the costs. Experiencing win-lose from the lose side, People of Color expose the model for what it is: a harm-dependent system.

Truth-telling about a win-lose system is painful on both sides. Revisiting trauma is painful for those who have suffered losses. On the White side, the experiences of Peoples of Color hold up a mirror for us to see who we become when the winner role frames our behavior, and this is painful as well. Humanity and decency have applied only to us, as we have adopted and instituted harm-dependent habits in our interactions with others. Empathy in particular suffers. Empathy is a protective mechanism for our species, preventing us from doing harm to others; yet empathy is precisely what a win-driven mindset numbs. If we want to win, we cannot afford to feel empathy for those we force into the loser role. If this is what a thought model does to humans, then we need to know it—we all do.

Activism hones our critical faculties, so we can self-evolve as peoples. In December 2012, the Idle No More (INM) movement began among Indigenous Nations in Canada and quickly inspired global actions. Their core message has been an inclusive call to humanity: “These issues are not Indigenous issues,” the Victoria, BC, INM community said, “These are human issues that impact all life.” The four women who started the Idle No More movement in December 2012 affirm the inclusive nature of its principles and goals:

Idle No More calls on all people to join in a revolution that honors and fulfills indigenous sovereignty and protects the land and water. All people will be affected by the continued damage to the land and
water and we welcome indigenous and nonindigenous allies to join in creating healthy sustainable communities. We encourage youth to become engaged in this movement, as you are the leaders of our future. … We encourage people to organize community gatherings, share knowledge and support, and to stay strong and united in spirit as we move forward together.8

The four women who started Idle No More: Sheelah McLean, White Canadian; Nina Wilson, Nakota and Plains Cree; Sylvia McAdam, Saysewahum, Cree, Jessica Gordon, Pasqua 4 Treaty Territory. Photo by Marcel Petit. mpetproductions.
Activism engages collective learning as well as self-change by naming realities that win-lose thinking hides. In August 2014, for example, the Black community in Ferguson, Missouri, led the nation in confronting the impunity with which White police, security officers, and vigilantes murder unarmed Black people. Because of the protests, the world learned that Officer Darren Wilson, 28, a White policeman, fatally shot Michael Brown, 18, a Black teen, on 9 August 2014, a month before he planned to attend college. Three months later, a grand jury ruled not to charge Ofc. Wilson with murder or any crime.
The police killings of Black men neither started nor stopped with Michael Brown: no accountability means no change. Across the nation, state-controlled, taxpayer-funded institutions—the police and judicial systems—continue to treat Black people with lethal contempt, as if Black lives mean nothing. Alicia Garza, African American, co-founder of the now international movement, #Black Lives Matter, explains, "Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression." Black activists nationally and worldwide are galvanized in struggle, because Ferguson’s experience of institutional and ongoing racial oppression is theirs too.
Having a child, brother, or spouse shot for no reason besides being Black is a horrific experience, so where is the hope? Again, in the critical awareness that People of Color forge in this fire and then make known through their words and actions. Their knowledge about win-lose, harm-dependent systems holds the wisdom we need to create a civil society that ensures everyone’s safety and well-being.

By sounding the alarm, voices of color throw us a lifeline of awareness about the real nature of our system. Ora Schub commented, "Because of our privilege, Whites do not have to think about racism all the time because we are not constantly being targeted by the racism." By contrast, People of Color learn systems thinking and critical analysis early on, whether they call it that or not. From scholars and political leaders to community organizers and grieving family members, communities of color build knowledge and critical awareness born of generations of struggle in a society that predetermines them to be losers—experiences that, at least in North America, Whites as a people have not had.
Ora Schub, J.D., self-identifying as White, queer, and Jewish ethnicity, was a restorative practices and Circle trainer for the Community Justice for Youth Institute (CJYI) in Chicago. Photo courtesy of Ora Schub

Dante Barry, Executive Director of the Million Hoodies Movement for Justice, a national youth justice organization that works to protect young people of color from racial profiling, mass criminalization, and gun violence. Photo courtesy of the Million Hoodies Movement for Justice
The most powerful systems that we must undo, some voices of color tell us, are systems of thinking and culture—our philosophy. Dante Barry, African American and an organizer for the Center for Media Justice and for the Million Hoodies Movement for Justice, explains that civil disobedience provides a "cultural intervention" that aims to alter the narrative. Because racism is a cultural construct, we need a cultural intervention to change systems that dehumanize, impoverish, and kill people because of their phenotype. Speaking on Democracy Now!, Michael Eric Dyson, African American, professor, author, and radio host, agreed: the problem is "an extremely dangerous mindset." We need to fight "the metaphors, the stereotypes, the tropes that operate in that police officer's imagination that are equally lethal."[12]

The more Peoples of Color rise up, the more we all grow in our critical awareness, and the more hope we have for collective self-change. Indigenous Nations from around the world made their voices heard when they came together as Water Protectors to affirm Mni Wiconi, "Water is life." In April 2016, the Hunkpapa Titunwan, the Standing Rock Sioux Nation, put out a call for Indigenous Nations and all peoples to stand with them in prayer against the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL). Energy Transfer Partners was determined to lay the pipeline under the Missouri River and to destroy whatever Indigenous sacred sites and burial grounds lay in its path. People came by the thousands, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to stand in prayerful support of water, land, the 1851 Treaty, and future generations. “No living being can survive without water,” Water Protectors explained.
Celebrities showed up. Crowd-funding sites raised millions of dollars. The camps grew, creating from scratch on the open prairie a town of an estimated 12,000 at its height.

On 5 December 2016, the US Army Corps said that it would not approve the easement necessary for the pipeline to cross under Lake Oahe and that an Environmental Impact Statement for the entire pipeline, long overdue, must be made. Although the Trump administration overturned this decision, the struggle continues in the courts. Who knows how long the oil will actually flow?

But the Water Protectors’ achievement went beyond the pipeline. They demonstrated the power of Indigenous culture-based unity and spiritual action, which urges people to act on our best values as we oppose something destructive. Whereas win-lose methods use force and violence, being good relatives relies on respect and love. The Water Protectors demonstrated the power of coming together in respect and love, which social media made possible on a global scale. People from all over the world resonated with the Indigenous Nations’ message. To the fossil fuel giants, they said with both prayer and determination, “Enough! No more!”

“A person walks past the flags of many Indian Nations in the Oceti Sakowin camp during a protest against the Dakota Access pipeline near the Standing Rock Indian Reservation near Cannon Ball, North Dakota, US November 10, 2016.” REUTERS/Stephanie Keith
From experiencing family members being shot to facing the loss of land and water due to oil pipelines, Peoples of Color know what is at stake on a daily basis. They, their ancestors, and their descendants experience the full force of the “lose” side. Our White forebears knew losing as well. They did not pick up and leave Europe because they were the winners there. Perhaps a blood-memory fear of being a loser once again has made us act so disconnected from humanity. Voices of color call us back: “Let the model go! Win-lose and harm-dependence are deadly for everyone—no win. We can make this work as relatives.”

2. Physical Reality Trumps Harm-Dependence

The second source of hope lies with physical reality: the Earth as an organic, living being. We experience the living Earth every moment: we are intimately connected through every breath, through food and water, through weather, through where we live, and through the geomagnetism that resonates in our brains. Our lives are possible here because we live surrounded by Earth and the natural world. We are Earth in expression, however much technology, concrete, and steel obscure this. We are the solar system, galaxy, and unseen dimensions in expression as well, but our relationship with Earth holds the most immediate learning.

The universe operates according to laws—natural laws, which are more binding than human laws. We cannot break natural laws. If we commit harms against the Earth and the natural world, we will not survive, just as we cannot survive falling from a skyscraper. The consequences of climate breakdown are inescapable—no negotiation, no appeal. The planet will become uninhabitable for most forms of life, if we do not change our paradigm. After Hurricane Sandy tore through one of the wealthiest places on Earth, New York City, Bloomberg Businessweek’s cover read, “It’s Global Warming, Stupid.”

Physical reality is the ultimate power big enough to say “No!” to the win-driven mindset. Toxins are toxins: no corporate PR can change that; toxins accumulate in our bodies and in the natural world, and the chemicals have the effects they have. Similarly, swapping carbon offsets or credits is more of the same—finding ways to commit harms and get away with them. The scheme simply enables more harm-dependent behavior. Earth, physics, and nature are not fooled. Kumi Naidoo, South African and speaking as the director of Greenpeace International in 2011, summarized reality’s power to intervene: “Nature doesn’t negotiate, we can’t change the science, and we have to change the politics.”14
People, especially young people, get this. They are outraged by the climate legacy they are inheriting. Young people see that physical reality is saying “No!” and will say it more forcefully with each year of their lives. This is a source of hope, because it means we must change—if young people are to have a future.

After his arrest while protesting a pipeline expansion in Western Canada, Tamo Campos, then 24, grandson of Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki, spoke passionately:

Why are we putting our economic system—the market—above the very ecology that we all depend upon? We're more dependent on clean water, fresh air and clean soil than the market! It's the thing that keeps us alive. We have
to stand up to unjust laws—to make those the laws, because those are the laws that have always governed our lives. And Indigenous people have had natural laws that predate colonial laws by thousands of years, and we need to respect that.¹⁵

Tamo Campos, snowboarder and environmentalist, grandson of Canadian environmentalist David Suzuki, speaks after his arrest while protesting Texas-based Kinder Morgan’s plans to build a pipeline through Burnaby Mountain, Vancouver, BC, 22 November 2014. Photo by Jennifer Gauthier. Courtesy of Burnaby Now.

Tamo’s grandfather, Emeritus Professor David Suzuki, wrote in a letter about his grandson’s arrest, “Tamo is fighting for the world that will be left to his generation in the future. I believe what Kinder Morgan and companies like it are doing is an intergenerational crime but there are no legal precedents to pursue criminal charges on that basis.”¹⁶

Hope rises still, though. We may yet be able to turn things around. In her article, “How Science Is Telling Us All To Revolt,” Canadian journalist Naomi Klein reports on a presentation by complex systems researcher Brad Werner about climate change. His December 2012 session was titled, “Is Earth F**ked? Dynamical Futility of Global Environmental Management and Possibilities for Sustainability via Direct Action Activism.” Naomi Klein reports:
[T]he bottom line was clear enough: global capitalism has made the depletion of resources so rapid, convenient and barrier-free that “earth-human systems” are becoming dangerously unstable in response. When pressed by a journalist for a clear answer on the “are we f**ked” question, Werner set the jargon aside and replied, “More or less.”

There was one dynamic in the model, however, that offered some hope. Werner termed it “resistance”—movements of “people or groups of people” who “adopt a certain set of dynamics that does not fit within the capitalist culture.” … [T]his includes “environmental direct action, resistance taken from outside the dominant culture, as in protests, blockades and sabotage by indigenous peoples, workers, anarchists and other activist groups.” …

[Werner] isn’t saying that his research drove him to take action to stop a particular policy; he is saying that his research shows that our entire economic paradigm is a threat to ecological stability. And indeed that challenging this economic paradigm—through mass-movement counter-pressure—is humanity’s best shot at avoiding catastrophe.17

Naomi Klein, Euro-Canadian, award-winning journalist, syndicated columnist, author and activist. Photo by Mariusz Kubik, 20 November, 2008, Warsaw, Poland. Licensed under CC BY 3.0.
Climate experts agree. The stakes are ultimate for our species, and changing the “game” now seems to be our only real option for “sustainability”—i.e., survival. Klein goes on to say:

So what Anderson and Bows [Kevin Anderson and Alice Bows of the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in the UK] are really saying is that there is still time to avoid catastrophic warming, but not within the rules of capitalism as they are currently constructed. Which may be the best argument we have ever had for changing those rules.18

To survive as a species, we must change how we think—our paradigm. “Resist!” read the giant banner that Greenpeace hung over the White House in late January 2017. We cannot persist in harm-dependent habits and survive. Realities beyond our power set the laws that determine the parameters for human survival. How do we respond to those laws? We have choice here, but whatever we choose has law-bound consequences.

3. Our Brains Give Us Powers of Awareness and Self-Change

The third source of hope lies with us. We can choose differently; we can change the game. Our brains give us the power to make the changes we need. We do not have to keep going down the win-lose road of harm-dependence. Our brains give us both other options and the power to choose them.

Indeed, our brains point us in the direction we need to go. Again, what is distinctly human about our brains is not our capacity to kill, fight, or compete. We share these abilities with other species. We also share with other species our abilities to empathize, to be compassionate, to form enduring bonds, and to take moral actions.19 Based on comparative brain studies, some scientists wonder if some species living on Earth surpass humans in these capacities.

So what special gifts does our species bring to the story of life here? The line differentiating humans from other species gets fuzzier the more we know about the peoples of the natural world. It seems, though, that what is distinctly human about our brains is at least twofold: the scope of our ability to comprehend, process, and communicate complex relationships; and the scope of our ability to take a decisive role in our own development. We shape our brains according to our choices, and this “neuroplasticity” is a power our brains give us throughout our lives.
Parts of our brains—the oldest parts—get sucked into win-driven, harm-dependent behaviors, but other parts, including the most distinctly human ones, offer a way out. Flexing our in-built powers to reflect on and change our course, we can embrace the foremost truth that we exist at all because we are related—related to each other and all that is.

As this awareness grows, we can change our mindset and behavior patterns in ways that we as humans are equipped to do. We are not stuck being the worst possible relatives to each other and the planet. Self-change is a gift we possess. It is encoded in our brains, and our evolution all the way along has depended on it. We can still choose to learn how to be good relatives.

4. The Lesson of Fractals: We Can Choose What to Iterate

Choosing a different model is not a one-time event. To make a paradigm change, the choice must be repeated—over and over, every moment, every day, from here on out. This is not a burden; it is how life works, how the natural world is organized, and how our brains and
minds work too. In The Story of Philosophy, White US American philosopher Will Durant (1885–1981) observed, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."\(^{20}\)

All the patterns that make up our world come from repeating choices. Mathematicians call the process "fractals." For non-mathematicians like me, fractals are created by repeating—iterating—the same formula or pattern many times. ‘Iterate’ means to repeat repeatedly—over and over and over. The result is incredibly intricate patterns that are self-similar: they look similar on the biggest scale as on the smallest.

Fractal patterns occur throughout nature. Our bodies can be described as fractals. Images of fractals include ferns, trees, brain synapses, mountain ranges, river networks, clouds, coastlines, Mountain Goat horns, blood vessels, frost crystals, ocean waves, DNA, and galaxies. Repeating formulas—a set of relationships—is how our world is put together. Fractals illustrate how the patterns we experience come to be. What is being iterated—the idea, values, paradigm, or formula—makes all the difference in the patterns that follow.
Tree branching illustrates the iteration of branching. The branching pattern repeats at different scales to create a self-similar life form: a small piece of a tree looks somewhat like an entire tree. Photo by Sue Eagle, Kildonan Park, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, 25 May 2013. Used with permission.
Why wouldn’t the same process of iteration that holds for the natural world not also hold for the patterns that we humans create with our minds? The question is, which formula(s) shall we repeat repeatedly? Repeating a harm-dependent dynamic, which win-lose thinking is, creates patterns in which harms proliferate. Those with more power harm those with less—without end. Worse, the pattern is self-similar: it looks similar on the international stage—and, who knows, perhaps even among intergalactic peoples—to how it looks on the playground or at work.

Yet win-lose is not the only formula that we humans iterate. Every day in the areas most important to us, we iterate ways of interacting that reflect values of being related and wanting to maintain those relations. Being in an enduring relationship involves repeating actions based on understanding, trust, patience, love, compassion, respect, honesty, responsibility, commitment to mutual good, and often selflessness. The most sustainable societies are those that are most skilled at helping humans iterate the values on which relationships, families, communities, and good relations with Earth and the natural world depend. Life blossoms in them and endures.
The source of hope here is that we can choose what to iterate. We are not stuck iterating a formula that engulfs us in harms. We can choose to iterate different values and stories about what it means to be human and how to live here. The patterns we create can be beautiful, just, and compassionate beyond what we have known. Only an old narrative gets in the way, and we can change that.

Historian, author, and activist Waziyatawin, Ph.D., Wahpetunwan Dakota, frames the challenge in the big picture:

Human beings are on the cusp of great change in the world. The flourishing of empire has advanced societal models based on principles of domination, exploitation, and violence. This has served to harm human beings, plants, and animals, as well as the air, lands and waters, thereby pushing us into a planetary crisis. Today we are witnessing the beginning of catastrophic collapses of the existing systems, both natural and man-made, as empire is ultimately self-destructive. But, we have a choice.21
Because we have choice, these four challenges are also sources of hope:

1. Voices long excluded alert us to harms long ignored and unrepaired. A more inclusive dialogue and more inclusive participation in power promote a shift away from win-driven ways of life. The hope and challenge lie in exposing the win-lose, harm-dependent model for what it is and for what it does to humans and the planet, so we can change the model. Both harmer and harmed benefit from the change.

2. Reality has the last word. The hope and challenge lie with aligning ourselves with reality more fully, so that we live sustainably and avoid bringing catastrophe on our species and untold others.

3. Our brains have powers we have yet to tap. The hope and challenge here lie with learning how to use our brains’ distinct powers in balance, so that we can exercise our powers as humans for self-change and self-evolution.

4. The formulas we iterate create the patterns we live. The hope and challenge lie in choosing not to keep repeating a win-lose, harm-dependent formula but to iterate instead values of being related—of being good relatives.

The upshot? Our hope and promise lie not in how wealthy or powerful but in how human we can become. First, human means all of us; second, human means living as part of nature and reality; third, human means exercising our brain’s powers in balance for self-change; and fourth, human means choosing which values and stories to iterate—repeat repeatedly—to create sustainable, happy ways of life. Being human means many other things too, but these four challenges hold great promise for putting us on a more survivable, promising, and joyful track.

* * *

Notes

1. For a definition of Indigenous Peoples, see T’hohahoken or Michael Doxtater, “Organizing Indigenous Governance to Invent the Future,” in For Indigenous Eyes Only: A Decolonization Handbook, Waziyatawin Angela Wilson and Michael Yellow Bird, eds. (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research, 2005), 177.


10. Email correspondence with Ora Schub, 10 July 2015.


18. Ibid.

