

Let go the chains of Victimhood...

In a new social and political era wherein we will be challenged as tribes to solve the problems that plague our tribal communities, moving up from victims to victors, the one thing we must do first of all is shed the chains of victimhood.

In the early 1970s, when I first took office as Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians, there was much Indian legislation before Congress, which required testimony from NCAI. In my testimony, I almost always led off with a litany of woes describing Indian country: the highest infant mortality; the lowest life expectancy; the highest unemployment; the lowest per capita income, and on and on. I did this to point out the devastation resulting from misguided and malicious Indian policy over many years. But I did it mostly to elicit pity or guilt, and to justify our requests for more appropriations, new programs, and policy changes.

Eventually it got to me that I was almost bragging about it, like one might brag about the Pine Ridge Reservation encompassing the poorest county in the U.S. So I dropped that pathetic preamble.

And today, thirty years later, it sometimes seems we still treasure our victimhood. Through guilt and public embarrassment, we keep the pressure on our federal trustee to do more for our people. In that sense, victimhood is working FOR us. But we must ask ourselves the question: “what is victimhood doing TO us?”

Victimhood is a prison from which we must free ourselves if we mean for our children to go forward into a better future. The generally pathetic conditions in reservation communities, of course, cannot be simply shed or denied. Those conditions are real, and it’s going to take a dedicated and persistent effort and a long time to remedy them. But we must understand finally that our problems cannot be solved by anyone other than ourselves -- our tribal communities and leaders. And we must begin now, for there is not much more time, and resources will dwindle when we are seen as hopeless.

We must first reject the notion that poverty and suffering on Indian reservations is inevitable for our people and our children – or that it is part of being a real Indian. There are Indian people who say that an Indian person who makes a decent salary and enjoys material goods is not a real Indian; that the real Indians live in poverty on the reservations; that being poor is the price of being real Indian. But the notion that it is somehow noble to forego financial security, material goods, modern conveniences, and self care for the sake of some strange fantasy of Indianness is folly. From the beginning, our tribes were formed by our ancestors as survival units to collectively deal with want and suffering, not to perpetuate it.

But the inevitability of our plight and the nobility of our sacrifice are being instilled in the minds of many of our young people when we keep reliving it in our writings and our classrooms, in Indian studies courses in colleges and universities, especially.

The history of injustice and inhumanity to the tribes must be taught, for history not learned is history to be repeated. But the history must be taught with accuracy and dispassion, as history and not as indoctrination to give Native American youth a sense of resentment or embitterment, and the white students a sense of guilt. And journalists have a responsibility as well to relate history with accuracy and truth.

In a recent column by Native journalist Jodi Rave, Sam Deloria is quoted extensively on the subject. His comments are hard-hitting and to the point. "College professors," he says, "could help... if they stopped objectifying Indians and treating them as victims. Students deserve better."

Deloria urges professors to quit perpetuating the theory that Indians are victims of multi-generational suffering because previous generations attended boarding schools: "Get over the trauma," he said.

"These kids should not have to succeed and develop healthy attitudes in spite of those who are supposed to be teaching them in college," he said. "We sell them short when we treat them as victims."

In 1956 I attended a summer program in New York City called the Encampment for Citizenship. It was a month-long workshop which annually brought together youth from all across the country and from abroad for some special learning about humanity and rights. Other Indian youth who had attended there over the years included Webster Two Hawk, Floyd Westerman, Amos Bad Heart Bull and Ada Deer.

At the encampment we had an instructor named Matthew Ies Spetter, an intellectual Jewish man, a native of Holland. What stands out in my memory of him was the large jagged numbers tattooed down his arm. He was apparently very young at Auschwitz or Dachau, or whichever camp this inhumanity was carried out, when the tattoo was cut into his arm, and as he grew, the blue-black numbers became distorted.

He was a warm, gentle man, a mentor to many of the young people who came to the encampment to learn about humanity and justice, and what we might do to make the world better. Dr Spetter never said anything about the numbers on his arm, or about his experiences in those Nazi camps of unspeakable horror. Instead, he helped us envision a bright and hopeful future in a better world, if we would strive to make it happen.

His unspoken message was that, personally, you must put the past behind you, no matter how painful. You can never forget, but you must look to the future with hope for a better world and determination to make it so.

The chains of victimhood keep many of our tribal people imprisoned in the depths of dependency, complaining about the wrongs that were done to our ancestors, and using those wrongs as excuses for our inability or unwillingness to progress. And many of our teachers, scholars, and journalists make excuses for our condition, and validate societal dysfunction and

failure as normal because of the history of our treatment at the hands of white America.

Our tribes have a long proud history of survival, and we must bring forth that pride in our ongoing fight for a better life we make for ourselves. Sovereignty itself presumes and proclaims superiority. Yet we choose inferiority when we wallow in victimhood, and see ourselves as hopeless people, forever haunted by the self-fulfilling theories of multigenerational trauma.

We cannot sacrifice one more generation to failure.

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