

## **VICTIMHOOD: Voices of Victors...**

In August 2008 I wrote a column titled "Let Go the Chains of Victimhood," which was published in Indian Country Today and Indianz.com. It was later reprinted in several native and non-Native publications, including ones in Hawaii and Canada.

Reaction and response to the article were mixed, although most of those I received via e-mail were in general agreement with my column. Articles in other Native publications tended to disagree.

From what I read in those responses, however, I see the beginnings of a movement, long overdue, to break those chains, and to move on into a future of self-sufficiency that will allow our people to reclaim their real heritage. Below I quote some of the responses to give the readers an idea of what might be the rallying forces behind a new era of growth and cultural stability in Indian Country.

From Steven Fool Bear of Standing Rock, "I have written several similar articles regarding the 'victim' mentality that has consumed Indian Country. I feel that many of our Native people have grown tired of this image, I believe things are beginning to change, especially here on Standing Rock."

Marlene Echohawk, PhD wrote: "I use the term Historical Strengths as opposed to Historical Trauma to try and help us to overcome the cloud of victimhood. Current problems exist and we must address them, but we must not fail to consider the many strengths we possess and the strengths our ancestors possessed to want to maintain our traditional cultures. I commend you for taking a stand on the issue of Historical Trauma and I lend my support. I am the first American Indian clinical psychologist from way back when and I can cite the strengths of AI/AN people from my years of practice with that population.

Laura Grabhorn, Assistant Director, Longhouse, Evergreen State College: "As a Tlingit and Haida person, I'm nobody's victim. It's a mindset that several of us Native people at The Evergreen State College are trying to fight. We certainly have critical mass in Native faculty and staff (28) and yet the yoke of victimhood is the playing field many non-Native friends---and some of the Native people---feel comfortable staying.

"We work closely with a lot of local tribal folks, so maybe our view is skewed by that, but everywhere we are looking, we see positive affirmations of culture, and that takes up so much time, there's little time to wallow."

Harvey DuMarce, Sisseton-Wahpeton, wrote: "I had an opportunity to read your recent column on Victimhood and I completely agree with your perspective on this whole notion. I see it being perpetrated in our tribal colleges and in mainstream American Indian Studies programs. Indians are always depicted as victims of some traumatic historical event or by white people in general. This elicits sympathy or pity for Indians. I know there are Dakota people who constantly bring up the hanging of the 38 men at Mankato in 1862 as an act of injustice. We know it happened. We know it was wrong. But where and when do we stop reliving Mankato? This is comparable

to the Lakota who bring up Wounded Knee as a constant reminder. As you say, we need to move beyond these historical injustices. As an educator, I am not interested in perpetuating victimhood thinking, but selfhood thinking. I want our young people to be able to think and act for themselves, but also to remember where they come from. I want them to know the strength and courage of our ancestors. I want them to know our ancestors had their own minds and ways of looking at the world.

Marilyn Hudson: “I am in total agreement with you on this - I think we have long overlooked the spirit to survive and do well despite the circumstances of the era and the various government policies, etc. One example, I am always so amazed and proud of the people who came out of the Hampton and Carlisle era; they were accomplished orators, musicians, and leaders. It is amazing to read their speeches and writings...”

John Martin, Oglala Lakota wrote: “I am also an enrolled OST member. On a recent trip there (Pine Ridge) I was saddened to see how things remain the same. A pervasive sense of hopelessness reigns throughout the rez. Indian victimization has crippled the tribe.

“For decades this self-loathing, self-defeating mentality has contributed to the social problems that now plague the rez, i.e. green-house alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, chronic unemployment etc; The victim card is a crutch, an enabler, an equal opportunity destroyer. Consequently, it is time to purge the victimhood ideology, it's time to get our people back on their feet.”

Finally, I was sent an excellent article written by Bill Yellowtail, Crow, and Professor at Montana State University. He had written this for the Autumn 2008 issue of Montana’s Agenda. The title of the article was “The Dignity of Indian Self-Sufficiency.” ([www.umt.edu/urelations/agenda.htm](http://www.umt.edu/urelations/agenda.htm).)

The following quotations are taken from that article:

“American Indians are going to have to stop identifying themselves by their tragedies and begin identifying themselves by their hopes, expectations and successes.

“Hopelessness is killing Indian people even more surely than fry bread, but neither tragedy is necessary. We must change our internal compass to find hope and success. Only we can reorient ourselves.

“The culture of despair worries me more than anything. A destructive dissonance has risen between our revered traditional culture and our day-to-day way of life. Dependency and despondency have beaten down self-sufficiency and dignity. A generational downward spiral of despair has created what sociologists call ‘learned helplessness,’ a sense of no personal possibilities, and ‘intergenerational trauma,’ a lack of willpower almost hereditarily transmitted.

“Besides rejecting denial and blaming others (the schools, the system, the White Man, the BIA) we must also reject the too easy response of ‘victimhood.’ Victimhood as a cultural myth – that is, a self-actualizing identity – poses a powerful danger for Indians.

Professor Yellowtail's article includes other Indian scholars as well, such as Michael Running Wolf, Northern Cheyenne: "We walk the border between protecting our values and acting the part of victim. Not victims in the sense of being injured individuals, but subscribing to the belief that we deserve sympathy. It's a belief that bases our identity upon the wrongs we have endured, rather than our accomplishments and integrity."

And Amy Mossett, Mandan Hidatsa, perhaps sums it up best: "Our tribes have survived catastrophic events in the past 200 years. But if we grieve forever, we will never move forward."

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